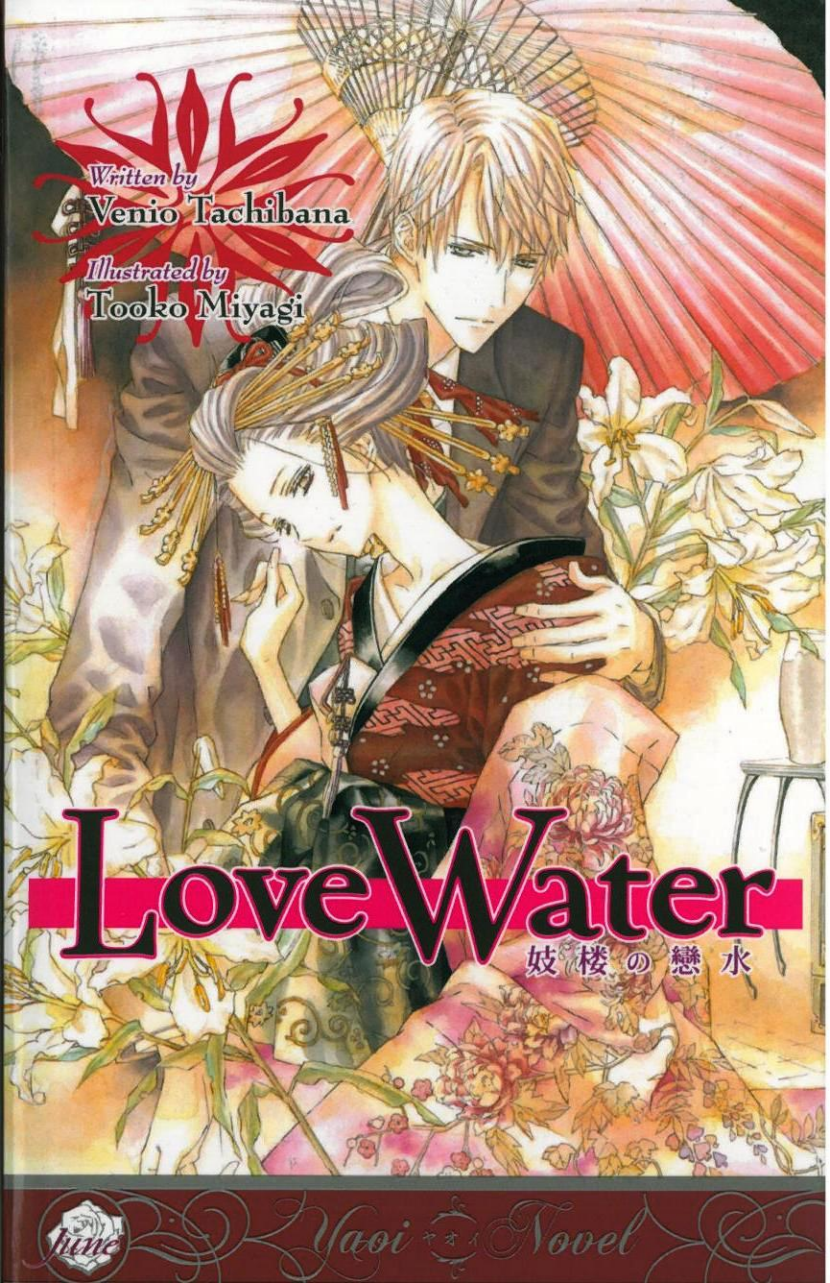




Written by

Venio Tachibana

Illustrated by

Tooko Miyagi

Love Water

水戀の楼妓



Vaio ヤオイ Novel

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Masaomi held the back of Misao's neck and pulled him close to share yet another kiss. Misao's hands had only rested on the cloth covering Masaomi's chest, but they inched upwards until his fingertips brushed the man's shoulders, when he surrendered himself to an impulse and clung to him. Masaomi's hold around his waist tightened in response.

Their lips were pressed so firmly together that Misao couldn't even breathe.



In the intricately mannered world of an Osaka brothel in Meiji-era Japan, Misao, a beautiful male servant, can only dream of a time when he can earn enough money to pay his debt to the brothel and escape his servitude.

Into his small, stifling world comes Masaomi Towa, the handsome and wealthy heir to a corporation and a newcomer to the rules of the pleasure district. Masaomi's sincerity and kindness penetrate through Misao's practiced cynicism, and Misao finds his heart captured by love for the first time. But Masaomi has come calling to meet with Ukigumo, the brothel's beautiful head courtesan. Will Misao's deepest desire come true, or will the cruel reality of the brothel destroy his dream of love?

Venio Tachibana's beautifully-rendered portrait of Meiji Japan evokes an era gone by. Includes illustrations by Tooko Miyagi.

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Written By
VENIO TACHIBANA

Scorpio - November 9 – Blood type O

On the horoscopes they do every morning on TV, they said, "Watch out for burns!" I laughed, but then I burned my middle finger.

Illustrated By
TOOKO MIYAGI

Last year, I said I wanted to redecorate my apartment, but I never did. I think it's going to be another year like that.

LoveWater

妓楼の戀水

Written by
VENIO TACHIBANA

Illustrations by
TOOKO MIYAGI

English translation by
Karen McGillicuddy



Los Angeles



Tokyo

LOVE WATER

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Prologue

Evening was approaching in Shibai-machi, and the traffic in Dotonbori was made more clamorous by vehicles like rickshaws and horse carts.

The gas lamps that had come in the first years of Meiji dotted the street. Lamplighters thrust their flames into the wicks and the cherry blossoms lit up with a gentle white glow in the deepening darkness. A row of these magnificent cherry trees ran from Dotonbori past the western side of Kadoza and straight up to the grand temple of Hozenji, where they stopped abruptly in front of the soaring western gate.

Across from the great portal was the newly-opened district of Namba.

Home of the Otobe pleasure district and the premier brothels of Osaka, where even the cherry blossoms changed color.

Chapter One

The evening cherry blossoms were dyed by the light of paper lanterns.

Nights in the pleasure district always seemed red. Why was that?

I suppose it's the color of madness, Misao mused, resting his hands on the vermillion railing. He raised his chin ever so slightly and narrowed his languorous eyes like a cat.

A breeze blew through the spring evening, making Misao's hair dance freely over his shoulders, despite the fact that he was a man. The movement exposed the delicate skin of his neck, which stretched up beyond his tall collar.

The merry sound of singing came through the sliding doors, muffled by the distance.

A sigh escaped him.

He wanted to dance, his mind free to float and play without restrictions, far from the shackles that bound his body.

At times like this, he didn't want to feel or think about anything.

"Why hello there, Misao."

A voice called out to him from the western hallway, dragging him back to reality.

Hiding a sigh of disappointment, Misao turned his

head indolently. This was all reality was.

The guest was on his way back from the washroom, his face reddened slightly by alcohol. He came toward Misao, looking content. He was the owner of a large kimono shop.

"Well, this is a rare sight. Nothing to do?"

The merchant spoke cheerfully, and Misao put on a modest smile and shook his head delicately.

"I'm visiting Seno'o's room. There was a bit too much wine, so I told them I was going downstairs to get some warmed wine. But..."

Misao turned languidly then, and cast his empty gaze over the railing.

"The cherry blossoms are so very red. They just captivated me."

He pretended not to see the man's face licking at the corner of his vision.

Ever since he was a child, he had known how to act to ensnare someone's interest or get what he wanted without much thought.

Words could be so inelegant.

Seeming to follow the path of a single petal as it fell through the air, Misao tilted his head. As he did so, his gaze fell finally on the toes of the guest's socks and Misao raised his eyelashes. The man caught this upward glance and his face filled with affection. He swallowed noticeably.

"Are you... eighteen yet?" the kimono merchant asked, sidling cautiously up beside Misao, closing the distance between them as he might with a skittish cat.

"Yes, last month." Misao nodded gracefully.

"I've known about you for a very long time, Misao, but you just keep getting more and more beautiful."

His meaty hands, warm with the heat of his body, plucked up Misao's right hand.

"Oh—"

Misao gave a practiced cry of surprise, tinged with naïveté, and the man's face relaxed.

"You don't look like a man at all."

Misao didn't fight the unpleasant feeling of the man's caresses on the back of his hand and only fluttered his lowered eyelashes. His only intention with such a refined act was to mock his suitor.

The first time Misao had been visited by the kimono merchant was many years ago, when he was a junior courtesan's maid. They were called maids in the vernacular of the house. The maids went everywhere the courtesans went, doing their small tasks. The girl Misao had served was wildly popular at the time and had considerable charms, but she was only attractive on the outside: inside, she was a viper, a demanding, proud woman. She would blow up at the slightest provocation and would beat Misao to make herself feel better. Her regular customers were very familiar with this aspect of her personality, but they were paying for a beautiful woman, and so when she tortured her maid in the tea rooms they looked the other way.

But that didn't matter.

The junior courtesan's maid bore it, and when she had grown tired of looking after him when he was around twelve the men began to behave in a much more obviously affectionate way toward him. The reason was

clear: as Misao began to develop, he was suffused with an asexual beauty that none of the girls could hold a candle to.

And after all, the men who came to these brothels to buy girls only judged people by their appearances.

They became lecherous.

"If you get a break, why not come by my place? I would love to watch your dances for much longer than I can here, Misao."

Misao responded to the kimono merchant's suggestion by bashfully dipping his head. "Thank you. I will."

The merchant nodded happily three times, then removed one of the hands that held Misao's delicate fingers and reached into his sleeve. He pulled it back out immediately and rested it once more on Misao's hand.

Misao felt something rough against his skin.

"Is that a promise?"

The merchant squeezed Misao's hand tightly as a way of sealing the promise, then pulled away and hurried into the inner hallway. As soon as Misao lost sight of him, the false interest disappeared from his face.

He blew on the back of his right hand, as if trying to remove dirt, then opened his hand to see what the merchant had given him. It was a five yen bill.

"Thanks," he murmured insincerely to the note in his hand.

Misao had worked a month straight in the pleasure district without a day off, and he might have earned just as much from his performances as this amount. He squeezed his fist and decided that if this was his price, it

wasn't too shabby. Not too shabby, but still a long way from the amount of money he needed.

But if he could keep this up, the day might yet come when it would be over.

His mind wandered, imagining the future.

He slipped the money he had wheedled into his sleeve and leaned his right hip against the railing to look out at the pleasure district.

This was the hour when the world within the gates began to be pervaded by energy. Within the milling streams of people, he found his gaze resting on a young apprentice who was striding along the road carrying her older sister geisha's samisen and being roundly chewed out. A two-person rickshaw came up behind them and pulled up to stop under the eaves of Misao's own Oumi Tea House.

The hood was up, so he couldn't see the passenger, but it could have been a guest arriving at the house or a geisha coming to perform in one of the tea rooms.

The wind blew his long bangs into his eyes and he swept them back behind his ear in annoyance. He peered at the cart and saw the first passenger climb out. It was the owner of an introductory tea house that worked as a guide for customers to the world of the tea house and the pleasure district. Both his hands rested on his belt. He stepped away from the rickshaw and bowed with great refinement as the second passenger climbed out. This was obviously a client. And since the owner had not left the work to the younger members of his tea house, but had escorted the client himself, it was also obvious that this man was a very important customer.

Misao saw a head of soft, pale hair emerge from under the rickshaw's hood. Then he spotted a shoulder covered in a flocked coat the color of dry leaves. He felt a sudden burst of breath on the back of his neck and cried out in surprise. It had been a prank. But Misao's voice seemed to have reached the man's ears, because he turned his eyes up toward the balcony as he stepped down from the cart.

Misao's eyes met the man's handsome face.

Even from a distance, he was obviously an attractive man.

Keeping the same offhanded expression, the man gazed at Misao for a long time before giving a bashful smile and returning his eyes to ground level. The entire series of actions was performed with practiced elegance, in stark contrast to Misao who had been caught by surprise and had stared wide-eyed at the man the entire time.

We come from different backgrounds, Misao thought bitterly.

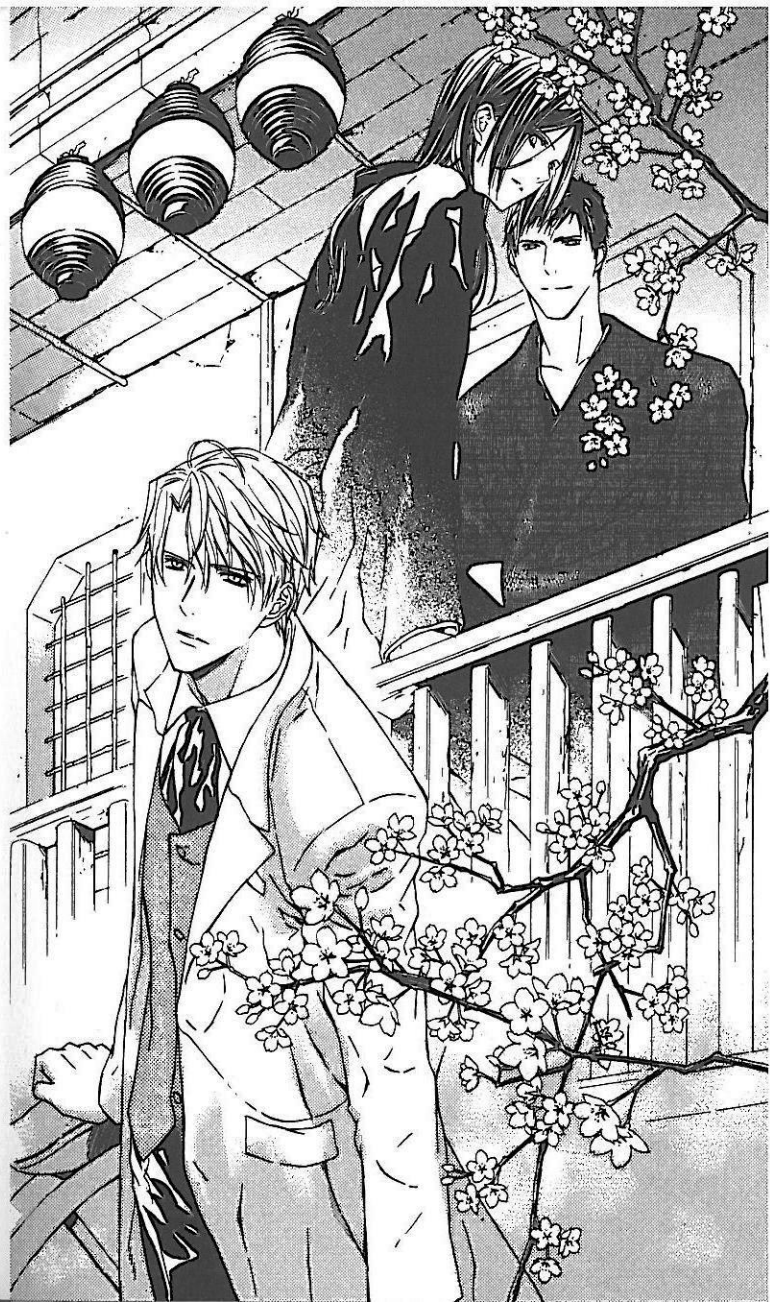
Nothing showed a person's true breeding better than how they reacted to unexpected situations.

"Oh-ho."

An amused voice that smelled very slightly of alcohol struck Misao's ear.

"Quite the fancy man in town tonight. The girls will love it."

The man chortled and leaned his elbows on the railing to stare down at the street. Misao glared at the dilettante out of the corner of his eyes. His kimono was disheveled and he gave off a powerful scent of attractive



"Do you want to?" he asked with a cool, victorious smile.

Katsuragi lost interest immediately and let Misao go.

"You're a real pro. Why can't you act more like the sweet little girl you pretend to be for Kato?"

"How repulsive! You watched us?"

Misao cast a sidelong glance at Katsuragi and jeered at him. His gaze slid past Katsuragi's profile and down the hall.

"I thought about it."

Misao saw a woman in a heavily-embroidered kimono walking with her nose raised a bit higher than usual, looking down at them. She had thin, sloping eyes that matched her upswept hair and made her look like a fox. This was the woman Katsuragi usually preferred, the second highest-ranking courtesan at the Oumi Tea House, Seno'o.

Katsuragi rubbed the back of his neck and looked back at her in irritation.

The people you least wanted to see always showed up at the worst times.

"I thought you said you were going to bring us warm wine. What have you been doing all this time?"

Seno'o regarded Misao frigidly, her tone almost suggesting that she had caught Misao in a meeting with an illicit lover. It was an absurd accusation, but it was true that Misao had been dawdling, so he decided to remain silent rather than take her bait.

"Don't be jealous of the help."

It wasn't clear if Katsuragi was trying to calm her

or incite her as he cut in nonchalantly.

"I'm tired of hearing about the help."

Seno'o turned on Katsuragi with an annoyed look.

"The only help I know about are the men who do so much hard work for the house up on the second floor. If you mean the sort of work that person can do, that only amounts to basking in the adoring looks of the customers and boring everyone with his interminable dances in the tea rooms. It's as if he thinks he's a geisha."

Seno'o turned her disparaging face on Misao.

"I don't know how the owner feels about it, but it certainly doesn't look good."

Seno'o's flat declaration annoyed Misao, but before he could answer it, Katsuragi cut in apathetically.

"Could you avoid your shallow politics in front of the customers? I don't really care about these catfights," he muttered as if to no one in particular, and walked back to the tea room alone. But Seno'o could not contain her irritation with Misao and she went on.

"I'd like to know how you've managed to ingratiate yourself with him so well."

Seno'o offered Misao a hateful look and her red lips pulled into a cruel bow.

"Perhaps you're generous with your physical gifts."

"What did you say?"

Misao smiled lusciously at this vulgar insult.

"I've cornered the market on that. I can see that you haven't picked any of them up, anyway."

Apparently this response carried well, because

Katsuragi's boisterous laugh could be heard down the hall.

Seno'o was outraged, and she shrieked Misao's name.

But Misao paid her no attention and departed as if he heard none of what she screeched at him.

He entered the hallway leading toward the rooms and walked in a straight line, maintaining the same pace.

The Oumi Tea House was built around a central garden, and even in the Otobe pleasure quarters, whose streets were lined with brothels big and small, theirs had the greatest pride in simplicity. There were numerous tea rooms for the guests, but if all the sliding doors were taken out the space opened up into a banquet hall. Even when all the doors were shut, the shadows they projected of geisha plucking at their samisens and dancers beating the accompaniment on small drums made for a bustling atmosphere. Disregarding all the festivities, Misao turned down the hallway to the interior garden, then climbed the stairs.

Two flirtatious new girls came down the hall from the other direction. They were at the proverbial base of the ladder. New girls were still training to be companions and could not yet take customers. When the courtesan who served as their older sister and mentor took customers, they accompanied her to the tea rooms. In the entirety of the sequestered life that they would lead, this period was the easiest. They had a lot of free time and one often encountered them wandering the hallways. This was one of those times.

They cast a glance into the so-called reception area, the room for first-time customers, and chirped, "Hello, handsome." The room was set abuzz instantly and they giggled charmingly behind their sleeves, and scurried primly away.

They were so innocent. How long would that last? Misao wondered as he took a vacant, dispassionate look into the reception area. He saw at once why the girls had fled.

The sliding doors had all been pulled open to create a room big enough for twenty beds. Four new customers sat inside, three of them cross-legged on the floor. Their respective girls sat a slight distance away from each of them, looking professional in their embroidered kimonos.

Only one of the customers was sitting in formal seiza position.

He was so stiff, it looked like he was waiting to begin a tea ceremony. He watched how the girls sat across from him with a peaceful look on his face.

He looked to be more or less the same age as Katsuragi. It was the customer the owner of the introductory tea house had brought here personally only a few minutes ago.

A very young girl in a flirtatious kimono, her hair arranged tightly atop her head, kneeled down beside him to offer a cup of tea and an ashtray. This was Sazu, the maid to Ukigumo, one of the Oumi Tea House's prostitutes. It seemed they were going to offer their finest jewel to their finest customer.

Too bored to witness the same rituals performed

yet again, Misao was on the verge of continuing down the stairs when he heard a voice cry out in an unfamiliar musical scale.

"Thank you very much."

Misao halted in his tracks, as if he'd reached the end of a leash. He turned around awkwardly. He saw Sazu gazing at the customer, her eyes so wide they looked ready to pop.

Misao was sure he had the same look on his face.

He had never seen a new customer acknowledge the maid before.

"And how old are you?" the man asked Sazu kindly. This was a rare opportunity to hear someone speaking the language with a cultured accent.

"S—se—"

Sazu stuttered, her face filled with shock.

"I am seven... sir."

"Seven..."

The man mulled over Sazu's whispered announcement of her age, a look of anxiety flitting over his face.

Eager to escape this unfamiliar situation, Sazu quickly started to get up from her seat. The man lay a hand on the kimono that covered her knee and stopped her, then took something out of his coat pocket. He wrapped it in a white handkerchief and gave it to the girl, whose tiny hand hesitantly scooped it up. He drew his face closer to Sazu and whispered something in her ear.

Sazu shot him a dubious look, but held tightly to the object in her hands.

The man smiled at her placidly and nodded. He

had a kind face. Misao found his eyes resting naturally on the man's profile.

"He works for a big company in the east. His grandfather is the president of the Towa Corporation," someone said out of nowhere in a secretive whisper. Misao turned his head in wide-eyed surprise. "And he's an entrepreneur himself, despite how young he is."

Misao hadn't noticed anyone come up beside him. Kazushi, a friend of his among the servants, was staring into the reception area as well. Out of all the men at Oumi, Kazushi was the closest to Misao in age: only three years older.

Misao's face was rigid with confusion, which seemed to make Kazushi uncomfortable. He jerked his eyes over at him and lifted his eyebrows. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Misao continued staring at Kazushi as he asked this question, then shook his head haltingly.

He could never admit that he had been captivated by one of the customers.

"No reason."

Pushing his hair behind one ear, he lowered his eyes awkwardly. Only then did he notice the great tray that Kazushi balanced on one shoulder. On his tray were wine cups, bottles, and a plate of fish. Misao recognized it as the menu given to first-time customers.

"You're going to serve him?"

"As you see."

Kazushi looked at Misao triumphantly and winked.

"Can I do it?"

Normally, Kazushi wouldn't hesitate to agree to it.

He knew Misao had a huge debt to pay off. So when he could help Misao make a little extra money, he would ungrudgingly give his trays to Misao to serve to the important customers. After that, it was up to Misao to inspire the customer's predilections and make the situation profitable.

He looked back into the reception area.

Sazu bowed again and again to the man, then finally stood up.

Kazushi watched the man escort the maid to the door graciously before he finally answered.

"That's all right. These men aren't used to your tricks yet."

"Do you think young master Katsuragi has made me too good?"

Kazushi gave a short laugh, then walked into the room with his tray as if nothing had happened. Sazu squeezed past him quickly and walked straight toward Misao. She tried to duck past, but Misao reached back and caught her fingers.

Sazu turned to Misao in surprise.

"Come with me," Misao ordered, and dragged Sazu into a hallway hidden from the view of the reception area. Sazu looked a little guilty as she was pulled along. A coquettish little girl normally would have cut off a shriek, but she followed Misao as silently as a mouse.

Misao bent down to look at Sazu.

"What did he give you?" he asked with a serious look in his eye.

Sazu hunched her shoulders and stuffed the handkerchief she clutched in both hands into her kimono, trying to protect it. Her eyes were squeezed tightly shut. She looked like a child afraid of being beaten. The courtesan who was responsible for Sazu, her "older sister," was Ukigumo, a beautiful woman who combined modesty and flamboyance, inside and out. She would never raise her hand to her maid. But for the children in the brothel, being beaten was a fact of life. Whenever something happened, they drew themselves up like this. Misao remembered the reflex well.

"I'm not going to take it," he said with a rueful smile, patting Sazu on the head.

Misao just had to know what the man had given her. He felt like it would tug at his memory forever if he didn't find out.

"You swear?"

Sazu looked up at him warningly, then finally let her clasped hands, held like a tiny flower bud at her chest, bloom open for Misao, revealing their prize. The handkerchief seemed to bloom simultaneously, opening itself in her hands.

It revealed an adorable translucent bottle in a rainbow of colors.

Misao picked it up, and his eyes traveled back to where the bottle had come from with something like jealousy.

He brought the bottle closer to his eye and saw the smoothness of its surface, unmarred by even a single fingerprint.

Shaking it from side to side, the high-quality

multicolored candies inside it made a small tinkling sound.

"Ukigumo loves these," Misao murmured.

Sazu's eyes snapped open and she flew at him.

"He gave it to me!"

Sazu snatched the bottle back, the handkerchief dancing out of her fingers.

"Oh—"

A small cry escaped Misao. He reached for the cloth before it had even completed its snowflake tumble to his feet.

"Are you going to tell her?"

The anxious question fell like a stone between them.

"Dummy."

Misao looked up, as he scolded her with a stern voice.

"Even if I don't tell her, you have to. If she doesn't know that her maid has received a gift, she won't be able to thank the customer for it. And that will make your sister look very bad."

Sazu's face was tortured as Misao lectured her, her lips pressed into a thin line. When he saw that she wasn't going to argue, he decided that she had understood. But even when she nodded obediently, she still seemed upset.

"Who is it that makes it so you can wear pretty kimonos and eat as much as you want every day? Who's paying for that?"

"My sister," Sazu answered, in a voice tiny like a mosquito's.

"So you mustn't hide things from her," Misao affirmed with a gentle smile. "Do you think your sister would take that from you? When it was a gift to you?"

This time the small head shook from side to side and the little girl's hands fidgeted, at a loss.

"That customer..." Sazu murmured slowly, staring down at her hands. "He's nice."

"Why do you say that?"

Sazu fell silent when Misao asked her for proof, unable to offer any solid evidence.

"Because he gave you candy?"

Misao smiled patronizingly. Sazu glared, leaping to his defense.

"He's nice!"

Apparently unsure that her argument would be effective, Sazu ran away down the hall like a fleeing rabbit.

Her long sleeves fluttered behind her like butterfly wings.

"I'm sure he is."

Misao whispered his agreement in a voice he knew she would never hear as she fled down the hall.

He could tell, even as her tiny figure grew distant, that Sazu still clung protectively to the little bottle of candy.

But that wasn't the nicest thing that man did for you, Sazu.

Misao didn't believe that people who had been blessed by property and wealth brought only good things to those around them.

It was better not to believe that, in this wretched

world stained by lust and sex.

Misao gazed at the pure white handkerchief Sazu had dropped, then folded it carefully.

It had protected the bottle the little girl had received, and he tucked this small kindness inside his kimono, against his heart.

At two in the morning, the monitor on the second floor walked through the empty hall beating his wooden clapper.

This let everyone know that the time had come for last call.

Misao walked down the hall on the second floor, stifling a yawn.

Moans came from every direction, muffled by pillows, but Misao had been used to that since childhood. He found it absolutely degenerate that the men who came to these places enjoyed when the women made such noises. After this critique, the next thought that came to Misao's mind was of the customer in the reception room whom he'd discussed with Sazu. It was not the first time Misao had thought of him that evening. Everything that happened triggered the memory of him in his mind.

Of all the customers who came to the Oumi Tea House, there had been only one whom Misao had adored. They first met right after Misao became a maid and—he would never forget it—they had passed each other in the hall.

The man asked Misao how he had gotten a certain

injury on his face and when Misao didn't answer, he stopped the junior courtesan parading ahead of him and began to lecture her severely. The girl beat Misao for it later, but Misao knew it would pass. He was simply overjoyed that anyone had bothered to be concerned for him. The second time they met, Misao had run up to the man.

He felt an aura of selfless kindness from him.

He hadn't come by in months, though. Why was Misao thinking about him so nostalgically all of a sudden? He supposed it must have been the effect of the new customer.

Masaomi Towa.

Entrepreneur and heir to the Towa Corporation. With titles like that, he had the power to keep a woman, and warnings were circulating among them all not to blunder.

Misao had no connection to this person, but oddly, his heart fluttered and refused to settle down.

"Hey there, all done?"

Kazushi called to him from one of the hallways on the central garden as he put new fuel into one of the garden lanterns.

Whenever they saw each other, he always had a look of perfect understanding on his face. Misao could imagine that if he ever left the tea house he would be popular with girls, but he remained wasted on the men of the brothel.

"Are you on watch?" he asked with a yawn.

That day Misao had started work at ten in the morning, when he took part in calling out to customers

on the street in front of the tea house, so he was glad that his work was over.

"Yeah."

Kazushi winked and quirked a corner of his mouth.

"And I have to get the girls in order before they go out on the street tomorrow. I can't go to bed till that's done."

"How sad."

"You sound real sympathetic."

Kazushi frowned at him, then laughed. Misao stepped out of the hallway.

The girls slept on the second floor, but Misao and the other men slept on the first floor.

He turned toward the staircase. He was halfway down the hall when he saw a figure leaning on the railing, gazing down at the garden.

The person gave off a languid impression, dressed in a light summer kimono, caressed by the night breeze.

Misao opened his lips slightly and lay a hand to the crossed seams of his collar. He remembered the item he'd placed there.

I should return it...

Why was he thinking of doing something so conscientious?

"Having trouble sleeping?"

He'd spoken before he realized it.

The man turned around.

It was the man who had flickered through his mind all evening, the beautiful man from the reception room, Masaomi Towa.

He looked confused for a moment as he looked at Misao, then seemed to remember him. His expression instantly softened into cordiality.

"Good evening."

Masaomi greeted him elegantly. It was the voice he had heard speaking to Sazu in the reception area, full of romance and fantasy. It made Misao feel as if he were reading a fairy tale.

Misao bowed slowly. He raised his face once again with the same languorous speed and saw that Masaomi was still staring at him, illuminated by a beam of moonlight. The purity of the scene dulled Misao's nerve and he found it impossible to look directly at the man.

Maybe he ought to have waited until he was closer to speak.

Misao regretted it now, since he would have to awkwardly walk by so closely under Masaomi's gaze, his own eyes lowered.

Why was he being so ceremonious for the return of a single handkerchief?

He tried to dampen the uncharacteristic excitement in his heart, but the tension refused to leave his shoulders. In fact, he felt even more stressed than before.

He stopped in front of Masaomi, who seemed to be waiting for him, and slipped his fingers inside the collar of his kimono. At almost the same moment, Masaomi began to speak.

"This is my first time at a place like this. I came without any idea of what I was going to do."

"Hm?"

Misao raised his eyes with an almost impudent quickness, his long eyelashes cutting the air.

Masaomi looked at him with a weak smile, then turned his face slowly back to the garden.

The night breeze played through his soft hair. His bangs fell into his eyes, casting shadows over his face.

"So a courtesan is a woman who doesn't speak?"

Misao glanced curiously at the man's forlorn expression, disbelieving the furtiveness in his voice.

He must be teasing him.

The tiny doubt that floated into his mind never grew to be a suspicion: instead it withered quickly away to nothing.

Misao laid his hand on his kimono, which still concealed the handkerchief. He seemed to have missed his opportunity to mention it.

He didn't think this man was the sort of person who teased others for his own enjoyment.

"Only at a reception," Misao explained in a soft whisper.

Masaomi twisted his head around to look at him.

"The courtesans never use their mouths in front of a guest during his first visit. Not for speaking, not for drinking, and not for smoking."

"That's—"

His mouth seemed to have run away with his interest. Masaomi gasped, and cut himself off. Misao watched the man collect himself once more before turning to him and inquiring more politely.

"That means she will talk to me some day."

Misao stared at Masaomi wordlessly.

Masaomi seemed unsure of how to interpret Misao's silence and let out a short, nervous laugh in his embarrassment.

"I'm sorry. I must be keeping you."

"Not at all."

Misao shook his head slightly.

But he couldn't very well continue standing there when he had been given permission to go.

No...

The man standing before him was somehow similar to the old customer who had been so nice to Misao when he was young, but they were also completely different.

The customer who had treated him kindly had done so because he understood how brothels worked. He had always conducted himself skillfully in the tea rooms. He was what might be called a connoisseur of the pleasure quarters.

But Masaomi had just finished his very first visit and understood nothing. He was an amateur.

Misao knew that if this generous man were to enter a tea room with his utter lack of knowledge, he would end by paying out all the money in his pocket.

"Um—I'm sure this is very forward of me to say, but..."

Misao felt annoyed at himself for his stuttering speech.

This was the first time he had ever felt concern for a customer's well-being.

Masaomi looked at him curiously.

Misao let out a sigh of relief that his motives hadn't been discovered, then hardened his heart.

"If you're not yet familiar with the tea house, would you like for me to explain some of its finer points for you?"

"You?"

Masaomi asked, then immediately seemed to notice something and looked down into a corner of the garden. Misao followed his gaze. Standing on one of the garden bridges, one of the night watchmen had raised his lantern and was looking suspiciously up at them.

"Ah," Misao murmured, feeling fatigued. "He thinks I'm one of the girls."

It was a common mistake after dark. Misao wasn't particularly short, but his long hair blurred the line apparently.

"He's watching us to see if we're planning to run away together."

"You and I?"

He probably hadn't meant anything by that. But Misao was unusually taken aback by his words.

For a moment, he saw the image vividly in his mind: running with Masaomi, hands locked.

At nearly the same moment, they both turned their eyes from the watchman's lantern to each other's faces.

Their eyes locked.

Misao gulped and Masaomi smiled at him gently.

It was like a soft spring breeze, Misao thought hazily as the night air played through his hair.

Masaomi moved slightly away from the railing and turned his back.

"Then it appears we should go somewhere else."

He looked back at Misao once more, echoing his

thoughts, and tilted his head ever so slightly with a gentle expression.

"Even if you're only going to flatter me."

There were small butterflies drawn on several of the thin paper lanterns, and the flames inside caused their shadows to flutter on the walls.

They were in a room that could hold two beds, walled off by folding screens with cushions scattered about its wooden floor. It showed no sign of having been used.

Misao felt a little uncomfortable at the fact that this was one of the rooms where the girls slept, but perhaps that was because the room was so tidy; or then again, perhaps because there was a man sitting so formally right across from him. Masaomi was someone who was buying women with money, but at the same time he gave an impression of refreshing cleanliness.

"The second time you come, they will do the same thing."

Masaomi nodded wordlessly at Misao's explanation. The light of the lanterns cut a sharp relief on his serious face.

"The courtesan will speak to you more familiarly, but just as tonight, you will have to sleep alone. A courtesan will only loosen her sash for a guest after he visits three times."

Misao informed him about all the various methods of payment such as the tip, the monetary gift, and even

the courtesan's flower money, with the utmost propriety. Masaomi would occasionally raise a question and Misao would answer, until finally he finished explaining the basics. It had taken more than an hour to cover it all. There was no means to tell the time inside the room, so they didn't know the exact hour, but it must have been near four in the morning.

Masaomi never shifted his position during the entire discussion. He had barely even taken his eyes off of Misao the entire time. The intensity of his attention was almost frightening.

Misao pretended to have just remembered something and glanced at the screen, fleeing Masaomi's direct gaze.

"When is the tea house bringing you back?" Misao asked without returning his eyes to Masaomi.

The tip was typically paid upon leaving the brothel and often the tea house would send someone to escort the customer home.

"I requested first thing in the morning," Masaomi answered.

At the brothel, "first thing in the morning" meant four in the afternoon.

Misao turned his face back to Masaomi. He was still looking at him. It was a perfectly relaxed look, devoid of excitement.

"Then they should be coming for you soon. Would you like to change? I can help you."

"Oh no, it's still much too early for that."

He refused the offer assuredly, as if he carried a watch inside his head.

His calm seemed to radiate oddly into the environment. Misao had begun to stand up, but at the sound of the man's voice, he sat back down and gave an easy sigh.

The last thing he wanted to do was disturb him.

"Do you need anything else?"

Misao knew that they needed to somehow fill this time, but Masaomi only shook his head slightly. The next moment, he looked more relaxed.

"You've been a big help. Thanks."

Misao blinked slowly at this gratitude.

What a strange man.

He had no flaws.

It troubled Misao why someone like him would come to a place like this. He had wondered about it all night.

Masaomi ought to have attracted scores of women without needing to come to a brothel. Was it just the indulgence of a man with too much time and money, like it was for Katsuragi? Misao just couldn't figure it out.

There could be many reasons for him to visit a brothel for the first time.

Simple appreciation of women. A family custom. To see someone from work. To cheer himself up. Among all those, there was one more reason; a motive purer than the rest.

Well...that must be it.

Everything fell into place.

Well then.

"Did you know that Ukigumo likes candy?"
Masaomi looked surprised at Misao's sudden inquiry.

That must be it. He was almost certain.

Masaomi must have seen Ukigumo on the street going out to greet a customer and fallen in love at first sight. Suddenly, it all made sense. His gift to Ukigumo had never been intended for anyone else. He had known exactly what he was doing.

Confusion came over Masaomi's face when Misao pulled the object from his kimono and held it out to him.

At first he peered curiously at the handkerchief Misao held out to him, but a few moments later he let out a murmur. "Ah... that's mine, isn't it?"

"I'm returning it to you."

Masaomi gave a slight nod. He didn't even ask him how he'd gotten it and simply picked it up. "Thanks for going to all that trouble."

Misao watched him pull his hand away.

He momentarily regretted returning it, a strange sort of attachment flitting through his heart; but when Masaomi stood up, all business, Misao no longer understood why he had felt that way.

All he could do was shake his head at this mysteriously uncharacteristic mood.

Masaomi appeared to be tucking the handkerchief into the pocket of his flocked jacket, which hung in a corner of the room. His back was turned, so Misao couldn't really see what he was doing.

They had been talking the entire night, so this was the first time Misao had seen his back.

Why did it make his heart feel so empty?

"Don't you think it was a little arrogant to give the

maid a token intended for her courtesan?" Misao asked quietly.

It seemed highly unlikely that Masaomi would carry that sort of thing around with him as a matter of habit. It was much easier to imagine that he had done some research into Ukigumo's tastes.

Masaomi came back over to Misao and chuckled. He didn't deny it. So he really had come to the Oumi Tea House to try and win Ukigumo.

"Don't you feel sorry for her?"

Misao didn't know why he said something so petty. He felt almost nauseous at giving voice to these angry words and his face twisted. The eyes of the man across from him stared back, trembling like a candle flame.

It was the face of a man who had suddenly encountered something unexpected.

Then his eyes lowered and he looked to be deep in thought, staring at a point on the floor. It seemed Misao's words had dug up something much deeper inside him.

In the silence that followed, so quiet that they could hear the crackling of the fire burning in the lanterns, Misao briefly regretted his rudeness.

There had been no reason to attack Masaomi.

Misao knew very well how happy that small act of charity had made Sazu, even if it was unintentional. He also knew how very important the memory of it would be to her for the rest of her life.

So then why had he said it?

A sudden anger, quick like the flare of a match, had taken over his emotions.

Masaomi let out a single long sigh.

Misao held his breath and pressed his lips together.

"I see," Masaomi said to himself quietly. His big, round eyes closed once, briefly. "Definitely, such arrogance is highly unattractive in a person."

He turned to face Misao, chastising himself.

Misao heard the pounding of his heart inside him.

"It's all in the name of self-gratification."

Misao had always thought of this place as nothing but a lie.

Men and women held the ugly truth about themselves under layer after layer of gilding.

The truth had no place here.

A raspy breath escaped Misao's slightly open lips.

"Forgive me."

He bowed his head.

"It was very petty of me to say that."

He had no doubt made Masaomi say things he would have rather not said.

The man had spoken his feelings truthfully, without any pretense.

"Forgive me," Misao said again.

Masaomi moved silently to sit diagonally across from him. "Sit up."

All Misao could see were Masaomi's hands, resting lightly on the long kimono that covered his knees.

"I don't want you to apologize to me. In fact, I'm glad you said that. I need to be aware of this selfish side of myself." Misao felt a little suspicious of this act of self-discipline.

He slowly sat up and turned his head haltingly. This was the closest he had been to Masaomi all day. He saw that the man's placid features bore him no grudge.

"Hey, I still haven't asked you your name," Masaomi said with a light laugh. "I'm Masaomi. Masaomi Towa. And you are?"

"Excuse me for not introducing myself earlier."

Misao sat up straight and reoriented his body to face Masaomi.

"Misao. I was named for a festival."

Masaomi nodded.

"That's a pretty name. Could I be so bold as to take your hand?"

"My hand? I don't understand."

He tilted his head and held his hands out, palms up. Masaomi swept one up in his left hand.

Misao gulped and his eyes widened. He followed the path of his hand with bulging eyes as it was raised to the level of the man's chest, as it touched his skin, then he turned his eyes to Masaomi's face. His eyes were lowered to Misao's palm, the orange light of the lanterns casting the faint shadow of his eyelashes on his face.

The pulse in Misao's wrist thudded, as if competing with the speed of his heart's pounding.

He felt a single finger touch his palm, then slide over it.

A sensation shot through Misao, threatening to choke him.

The finger traced out a character on the taut skin of his palm.

It was his name.

Misao's eyelids fluttered with each stroke.

As he finished the last line, the man's finger withdrew from his palm.

"I don't know if that helped, since it was written backwards."

Masaomi lifted his head and looked straight into Misao's eyes. A tremor ran through his face and, as if he had been holding his breath, his shoulders shook slightly.

Misao imagined what a strange face he must be making right then.

Under normal circumstances, Misao was in perfect control of his expression. He would know it as surely as if he had checked in a mirror.

But right now, he had no idea what he looked like.

He had never felt so unstable before.

"About the..."

He looked earnestly at Masaomi, then looked everywhere but at him. Misao heard his own faint voice float out of him, like a paper balloon blown in the breeze.

"Your handkerchief... could I have it?"

"What?"

Masaomi appeared taken aback. Misao was shocked himself at what he had just said.

He covered his mouth with his hand at this unbelievable request.

Masaomi was just about to say something when the wavering light of a hand lantern shone on the screen door.

"That's the owner making his rounds."

There was a noise in the hall. It was Kazushi's voice. Instinctively, Misao readied himself to stand at a moment's notice. Across from him, Masaomi slowly turned his head, like a rusty tin man, to the shadows cast by the man's lantern on the screen.

"I'm sorry, I'm not dressed yet," Masaomi called through the door. His voice was more businesslike than Misao had heard it all night. "Could you please wait a moment?"

"Would you like some help?"

Masaomi refused Kazushi's offer. "No need, thank you."

"Let me," Misao offered quietly. Masaomi nodded and stood up. Misao stood as well, to help. Due to the urgency of the situation, Misao's heart pounded so erratically he was afraid it might simply stop, which would be no help at all. But gradually, it calmed.

The man pulled off his robe and Misao drew his shirt over his broad back. When he pulled his arms through the sleeves of his flocked coat, Masaomi looked over his shoulder at Misao.

"Thank you."

Misao was adjusting the collar of his coat when he said it and, for some reason he didn't quite understand, it touched him. He shook his head silently. His feelings were in strange disarray once again.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

Masaomi opened the door.

Kazushi had set the lantern on the floor and kneeled beside the door to wait. He looked up and noticed Misao

standing behind Masaomi. His mouth opened and he stared stupidly.

"Is something the matter?" Masaomi asked.

"Uh—no, sir. Please follow me."

Kazushi picked up the lantern and led Masaomi down the hall, and Misao followed behind them.

When they reached the first floor, he slipped out the gate.

A two-passenger rickshaw was waiting in the street. A small lantern hung from its side. The owner of the introductory tea house stood in the light, waiting for his customer.

Masaomi turned back to Misao. Misao was surprised by his sudden change in direction and he fell back a step. But Masaomi's steps were much larger and he closed the distance, gently taking one of Misao's hands. The feeling of his skin as he covered Misao's hand with his own made Misao's breath catch.

"Thank you for all your help," he whispered, catching Misao's eye. Then he silently pulled his hands away and walked unerringly back to the cart. The owner sat beside him and ordered the driver to take them away, and they set off at a quick pace.

"Guess I was wrong about you and him," Kazushi teased, holding his lantern aloft. Misao didn't answer. He dropped his gaze to his hands.

The handkerchief was folded in quarters, then folded in half in the middle. There was a ten yen note tucked inside. Misao felt a leaden weight sink into his heart.

This was much too large an amount to be called a

simple tip, and when Kazushi stole a glance at it, he let out a low whistle.

"What did you do?"

One corner of Kazushi's mouth twisted up, and for some reason Misao found that extremely offensive.

"It wasn't like that," he answered glumly, and walked back through the gate. He went toward the owner's room in the back. There was a fixed distance to reach the end of this job. He slipped his right hand into his sleeve and gathered the many bills that he kept there. It was everything he had earned from the customers that night. There must be eight yen in all. He wasn't including the ten yen from Masaomi.

He went into the room.

The owner had carelessly put his bed next to the hearth. He only woke up when Misao stood next to his pillow. He lifted his head, which was going white, disagreeably.

"Who's there?" he demanded imperiously. But when he saw it was Misao, his mood changed.

"Oh, it's you, Misao. You were working late tonight. How did you do?"

Misao knelt down silently and sat beside him. He laid each of the bills he'd received on the edge of the bed. The owner picked them up and counted them.

"You've got eight yen! Well done."

He raised his eyebrows, impressed.

"How much is left?" Misao choked out.

The owner quirked a corner of his mouth and sighed. "Don't be so stubborn. I've been here my whole life."

The owner stroked Misao's cheek with a sticky hand, and Misao slapped it away harshly.

"I'm not joking."

The owner's throat shook with his amusement. He was obviously a pervert to derive such joy from that treatment.

"All right, all right. You really are good."

He gazed at Misao, as if lost in a dream, and said the same thing he said every time Misao came to him.

"Your face, your eyes—every day you're more and more in the flower of your youth."

The owner reached out again, forgetting his lesson already, but Misao avoided him and stood up.

"I'm tired of this. I don't need you to tell me over and over how much I look like whatever. Thanks for your time," Misao exploded, then headed out of the room. The owner called out to stop him, still in his bed.

"You've been holding on to that thing the whole time you've been in here. What is it? A handkerchief?"

The owner peered at Misao's left hand with great interest.

Misao left the room without answering.

Chapter Two

Before the girls went out onto the street to attract customers as they had done every day before, they were called to a meeting in the tea house.

Passing through a curtained doorway, Misao arrived at a wide, open yard full of servants. Kazushi was beside him, fighting back a yawn every few minutes. Sometimes Misao caught the yawn, too.

Various girls stood on the wooden floor above the yard, some leaning against pillars fresh from their baths and dressed in robes, all looking disheveled. The director had smacked their bottoms many times and yelled at them to straighten up, but none of the girls wanted to stand straight and tall at an hour like this.

"I know some of you girls were working all night. So thank you, girls, for your dedication."

A woman sitting next to the owner challenged the director in a clear, authoritative voice. She was fresh-faced and looked to be in her early thirties. Her hair was done up in a Western style, but she wore a staid kimono of gradated violet and an obi with a bamboo motif. But the thing that really made her stand out was that her face was as flamboyant as a Western rose.

The owner appeared to have been in a good mood for some time. He cleared his throat to draw everyone's attention.

"As you all know, the lady of Oumi Tea House has been absent."

The owner's slack jaw tightened slightly as he addressed everyone.

The owner's wife had borne the burden of managing the tea house's affairs, but lately she was confined to her bed and had been away from the pleasure quarters. He seemed to be leading up to the announcement that the person who had replaced her was the woman with the commanding presence who sat beside him now.

"I'm sure you've all noticed already, but this is Miss Gikuyo, who'll be coming to stay with us for a while to help around the house."

The owner's face filled with joy as he introduced the woman. In contrast, Gikuyo didn't even smirk.

"Hello everybody," she said briefly, as she stared down at the assembled faces.

Misao's eyes locked with hers, and in that moment he decided that it was better to avoid approaching this strong-willed woman. He had no choice but to give a polite smile. Gikuyo, on the other hand, seemed to be sizing Misao up from head to foot. She thrust her pointed chin out and veritably snorted. It was clearly a derisive laugh.

Misao's anger flared.

"That old hag," he whispered poisonously.

Kazushi's shoulders trembled in amusement beside him, but when Misao glared at him out of the corner of his eye, he gazed innocently up at the sky.

The tinkle of a bell was their signal, and the girls who were going into the street checked their shoes.

That sound was the signal to let the public in the streets know that the workday had begun in the tea house.

Those girls who didn't yet have any appointments that night streamed onto the porch that they called their office, and sat down all lined up in a row. The office was open to the street, separated by a lattice. The girls sat and took elegant poses to be silhouetted against the lattice by the large lanterns behind them.

On the other hand, those girls who had had their customers arranged by the introductory tea house each left the brothel to go meet their respective clients. This travel was called being "on the road."

"Misao! Misao!"

The owner called out to Misao urgently just as he was heading up to the second floor.

"Yes?"

Misao had gone halfway up the stairs and lazily came back down. It seemed the owner couldn't wait for such a leisurely pace to bring Misao to him, so he ran up and grabbed Misao's arm.

"Mister Sakai is coming back!" he declared joyously, as he pulled Misao into the yard.

"But hasn't he retired?"

Misao's voice was slightly brighter as he asked this.

Sakai was the customer who had been so nice to Misao when he was younger, an authority in forensic medicine. Now that he had reached his sixtieth year,

he had left the field of medicine and was leading a leisurely life of retirement. For several years, Sakai had consistently been Oumi Tea House's best customer. But he'd been having back trouble for the last few months and hadn't been by for some time. If this long-standing customer of such great influence was making his return, it was understandable that the owner was dancing for joy.

"I sent Ukigumo out to meet him, and you're going to meet him out in front of the display girls. Got it?"

The owner climbed down from the platform and disappeared into the curtained doorway. Misao waited at the entrance as he had been instructed, until he saw the director bearing a lantern with the name of the tea house and leading a line of people. Behind her, leaning on a cane, was Sakai. He wore a bowler hat, a short-sleeved kimono with loose pants, and two layers of jackets. Behind him came more girls, carrying lanterns with the letter "U" inside a circle, then came Ukigumo in her best regalia, surrounded by her maids and apprentices.

When the head of the line reached the front of the tea house, Misao bowed and held the curtains aside for the guest.

"It's wonderful to see you again."

He greeted Sakai as he approached, then lowered his eyes.

Sakai stopped in the doorway and peered at Misao, with a white beard like a mountain goat.

"I bet you thought I dropped dead, eh? I'm not that old yet!"

His eyes arched happily.

Misao was glad to see that the old man was still as cheerful as ever.

"I'll be there to stand at your wake," he answered with a charming, playful smile.

Sakai's gruff voice was raised in laughter and he went into the yard. Ukigumo floated after him and her maid Sazu scurried along in the rear.

"Come along."

The new manager Gikuyo greeted Sakai in the yard and took his cane.

"My, my."

Sakai scrutinized Gikuyo's face, then blinked blearily.

"Here's another face I haven't seen in a while."

"I've just begun working as the manager for Oumi Tea House today. My name is Gikuyo. It's wonderful to meet you."

She bowed and Sakai nodded to her, then tottered onto the platform, wheezing with the effort.

"Sir, sir—is everything all right?"

Sazu ran up beside Sakai and tilted her head at him. Sakai found that amusing and just laughed and patted her on the head. Sazu was happy to be petted like this, and grinned toothily at him.

Misao watched their exchange out of the corner of his eye as he affixed pieces of string to the customers' possessions in the coatroom. When Sakai and Sazu joined hands to frolic, he saw his younger self in the same scene.

It had been more than ten years since their first meeting, but Sakai hadn't changed at all. Whenever

Misao saw him, he was a completely carefree old man, like an inscrutable cloud floating in the sky, enjoying every day of his life.

"Come here, Misao."

Sakai beckoned Misao over as he began climbing the stairs. He wanted Misao to come to the tea room with him.

Misao glanced over at Gikuyo for her approval.

"Mister Sakai is asking for you," she said and nodded, and Misao climbed up to the room with Ukigumo.

Where the old gentleman was, there was always singing and drinking, and a general commotion.

Besides Ukigumo, to whom he was engaged for the night, girls streamed in and out all night to entertain him. When someone mentioned that they wanted some noodles, someone else suggested ordering sushi, and the servants delivered enough for ten people. One of the servants called Ukigumo away in the midst of all this and she withdrew with her maid. But Sakai didn't let such a little thing upset him and the celebration showed no signs of dying down.

When Ukigumo came back to the room, they had already emptied several bottles of wine.

"I see you're busy as usual!" Sakai teased Ukigumo as she sat down beside him.

The Oumi Tea House was unique in the western pleasure quarters because its courtesans traveled. That meant that they visited as many different rooms in one night as the lower-ranking girls.

"I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you," Ukigumo

laughed, her eyes cast modestly down. She reached out casually with one hand and Misao handed her a bottle of wine, reading her wishes. Their fingers brushed briefly, her delicate fingers like slender white fish dancing around the bottle.

Of all the girls at the Oumi Tea House, Ukigumo was the only one Misao would say had inner beauty. No matter how unmatched the physical beauty, if the girls couldn't hide the storms in their hearts the influence of such ghastly emotions would show on their faces. Women in the pleasure quarters were, each and every one, slowly corrupted by this festering environment. Some couldn't bear the strain and left reality behind; many of those who overcame adversity were warped forever after.

But Ukigumo was just as she had been the day she was sold to the brothel: a core of beauty ran through her. At first glance she seemed like a supple spring flower in bloom. But she had a hardness inside her. She was beautiful, inside and out.

Out of the corner of his eye, Misao watched Ukigumo gracefully serve Sakai another cup of wine, and he thought of Masaomi. In fact, Masaomi was never far from Misao's thoughts, always clamoring for his attention, but Misao tried hard not to think about him.

There were many things in Misao's heart that he could not confront directly. Among those things were his despair and his hopes. Anything that might upset the delicate balance inside him, he shut away behind a poorly-fitted door. It was only when he'd discovered that technique as a child that Misao had been able to stop crying.

"Hey, is that Kazushi? You've grown up!"

Sakai looked surprised and Misao turned to look.

Kazushi was kneeling in the hallway just outside the tea room, his hands resting on his thighs as he bowed to Sakai.

Sakai picked up a new cup of wine and held it up to Kazushi, waving it up and down.

"I shouldn't."

Kazushi inched into the room and sat across from Sakai. He accepted the cup with both hands and let Sakai serve him, then drained the contents in one shot and set the cup down again. He jerked his chin, asking for another. He glanced at Misao, then turned back to look at Sakai.

"I came to borrow Misao, actually."

"That kid Katsuragi, is it?" the old gentleman asked with a knowing grin, but Kazushi denied it, laughing.

"Nope. Guess again."

Who could it be? Misao searched his memory for several moments, but quickly cut off his conjecturing. The experience would be the same no matter who it was, so there was no point in speculating.

"You've become pretty popular," Sakai teased Misao, but then his eyes went wide. "Oh, oh, oh! Wait a minute, I forgot. It must be my age—I forget everything lately. Here, here. I wanted to give you this."

Sakai pulled a folded fan from his jacket pocket.

Kazushi moved politely to one side so that Misao could sit down across from Sakai.

He accepted the fan that Sakai offered him. He pulled it open, revealing a pure white field with a

watermarked painting of cherry blossoms. It was elegant and of magnificent quality.

Sakai raised both his index fingers and drew twirling circles on either side of his merry face.

Following his wishes, Misao fluttered the fan elegantly by his face as he sat, sliding his index finger across each slat of wood in the frame every time he flicked his wrist, spinning the fan in a circle. Finally, he tossed the fan up and caught it in three fingers, all the while watching Sakai's smiling face.

Sakai grinned toothily and clapped appreciatively. "Beautiful."

"Thank you. And thank you for this."

Misao gave Sakai a quick bow, then stood up. Kazushi apologized for interrupting as well, then led Misao into the hallway. As Misao left the room, Sakai called out to him kindly. "I hope you come back."

Out in the hall now, Misao bowed once more to Sakai.

Misao felt like his heart had been dashed with cold water, but he held his feelings in check and hurried over to fall in behind Kazushi, who stood slightly apart from him in the hall.

"Who is it?" Misao asked without pretext.

Kazushi drew so close he tilted his head.

"The Towa boy."

When Misao heard the name whispered at his ear, he lost all sense of reality.

"What—?"

By the time Misao had collected himself enough to respond, Kazushi was already at the end of the hall.

"He's in the Holly Room. I'll leave the rest to you."

Kazushi turned back and summed the situation up simply, then headed down another hallway. Misao hurried after him.

"Hold on—"

He grabbed Kazushi's arm and pulled him back.

Kazushi arched an eyebrow and looked at Misao. He had a strange look on his face. No, maybe Misao was the one acting strangely. Thrills were running through his entire body and he couldn't stand still.

"But why me? If he wanted Ukigumo, she had two of her apprentices there with Mister Sakai, too. Don't we usually make one of them fill in?"

"Well, that's true."

Kazushi scratched behind an ear, looking like he was at a total loss. He clearly didn't want to be involved.

"I wish the guys would just say if they didn't want an apprentice."

Misao's riotous senses calmed for an instant, and he gave a clumsy smile and a quick sigh. "He's probably going to end up saying that, anyway. 'Oh, no, I only wanted Ukigumo.' I'm not even a girl," he argued sulkily. He felt something nagging at him unpleasantly.

"Maybe so, but he's a customer. You can't just ignore him."

Kazushi's lips twisted into a rueful smile and he snorted.

"I thought you'd be happy, your dream is coming true."

"Didn't I tell you, it wasn't like that?" Misao snapped in annoyance.

"Yeah, yeah."

Kazushi patted Misao on the shoulder, almost reassuringly.

"Well, anyway, he's all yours now."

When they stopped in front of a tea room, its sliding doors firmly shut, they heard the sound of a zither coming from inside. It was truly accomplished playing.

Misao took a breath, then knelt beside the door.

"Sir?" he called, as he pulled the door open.

The delicate melody stopped.

Sitting behind the zither, his back straight and head tilted to one side, dressed to the nines, the man quietly turned his face to Misao. Misao looked into his eyes and caught sight of something unusual within them.

He was alone in the room. No geishas had been called. Misao guessed that he didn't want many people around him.

Misao folded his hands in front of him and bowed, then moved to sit, not across from Masaomi, but a slight distance from the butterfly-leg table in the room.

He didn't want to be a nuisance.

"I came to offer you some wine, but if I'm interrupting, I can leave."

Masaomi shook his head gently. "No, it's fine."

He pulled the picks off of his fingertips and turned to face Misao, the little table between them. Misao

relaxed and drew closer as well.

"Thank you for your help this morning."

Masaomi thanked him, his face mild, in place of a greeting. Misao inclined his head ambiguously and held up a wine bottle. Masaomi raised his cup without objection.

"Did you get a chance to speak with Ukigumo?" Misao asked, his question weighty with implication as he tilted the wine bottle over Masaomi's cup.

He was sure that when Ukigumo had left Sakai's room earlier, it had been to come here.

"Well..."

Misao saw Masaomi smirk at his own evasiveness and he withdrew the wine bottle curiously.

"She was as tight-lipped as a clam, just like last night."

"What?"

Misao's voice slipped out at this unexpected information.

This was Masaomi's second visit to the brothel. His second meeting with the courtesan. No matter how prideful the girl, she always spoke to a customer on his second visit to her.

"She was playing that zither there so that she wouldn't have to talk, and she was kind enough to let me borrow it."

Masaomi gazed at the zither anxiously, then turned his face back to Misao.

"I think she must hate me."

His sorrowful smile stabbed into Misao's heart.

"I can't believe that," he whispered.

It was exceedingly rare for a courtesan to brush off a customer. And what could she have possibly found to object to in Masaomi?

If it were me, Misao thought, then cut that train of thought off at once.

"Misao?"

The sound of his name flustered Misao more than it should have.

He was afraid he might drop the wine bottle, so he set it back on the table.

"Yes?"

He collected himself and tried to answer calmly, but he didn't think he managed it very well.

"What sort of work do you do here?"

Misao was at a loss as to how to answer this question and searched for his words.

"Well... I do lots of things."

"Such as?"

Cleaning the building, delivering trays to rooms, talking with the customers, lighting lamps: none of these things merited discussion. And the fact that he flirted with the customers to earn money was out of the question.

Misao looked down at the zither.

There was only one thing he did that he could be proud of with no qualifications.

And maybe it would cheer Masaomi up.

Misao drew Sakai's gift from his sleeve and rested it on his knees. Once he was sure Masaomi had seen the fan, he said, "Would you play something for me?"

Masaomi glanced briefly at Misao's composed features as he made this request, and after a languid

pause he agreed. "Certainly."

Masaomi stood and returned to the zither. He drew himself up beautifully and looked to Misao for his signal.

"What would you like?"

Misao's mind went suddenly blank. His eyes dropped to the fan as he considered. He remembered the painting on the fan's folded paper.

He looked up at Masaomi.

"*Sakura, Sakura*, please."

Masaomi nodded and Misao rose to his feet, holding the fan.

Internalizing the plucking strings, he drew his feet together femininely and loosened his knees to take the beginning pose.

The beautiful strains of the song began.

He rested his left hand over his right and pulled open the fan, the right hand pulling it forward three slats and the left pulling it back five.

Each time a string reverberated, Misao imagined a single pink petal dancing through the air.

Gesturing with his left hand, he held the fan flat and lifted it as he twisted his legs, sliding them over the floor to turn around.

His mind was utterly silent.

Ever since childhood, dance was the only art of all those Misao had studied that he hadn't hated.

It let him escape.

Like mist, or a cloud—he twirled the fan and slipped about the floor. Suddenly the sound of the zither stopped. But they had been approaching the final verse,



so Misao simply continued dancing in the silence. He held the fan flat, then he flipped it over and danced low to the ground. He stretched the fan out, then brought it to the side of his face. He touched his right knee to the floor and held the pose, shaking his head three times to end the dance.

Silence reigned for several beats until it was broken by modest applause. Casting his eyes to Masaomi, Misao's gaze asked him wordlessly why he had stopped playing.

Masaomi answered earnestly. "I realized that I couldn't properly appreciate your dance if I was playing."

Misao's eyelashes fluttered twice, struck speechless by his serious answer. Then he whispered, "It was nothing, really."

He laid three fingers over his heart and bowed. Masaomi returned the gesture.

"I feel better now. Thank you. You've been very kind to me."

He looked at Misao with a tender smile.

"You're a wonderful person."

Misao felt a sharp pain, as if tiny threads were tightening around his heart.

His brow wrinkled and he shook his head. He rushed with mincing steps to Masaomi's side and drew out the thing that he had kept tucked inside his kimono. He knelt on the tatami floor and swept up one of Masaomi's hands in both of his own as Masaomi stared at him in shock.

He never said a word. He only stared at Misao.

And Misao stared up at him. He felt there had never been a moment this serious in all his life.

"All I wanted was the handkerchief."

Misao slowly, tenderly pulled his hands away from Masaomi's.

"I did that because I wanted to," he said quietly.

Masaomi's gaze rested on Misao's face, then slid to the door.

"Welcome back," he murmured, his eyes narrowing with a smile as Ukigumo came in, Sazu in tow. Her face held none of its usual mildness; it was harsh as she looked back and forth from the money in Masaomi's hand to Misao's face. Sazu looked up at Ukigumo, frightened by this change in her older sister's usual behavior.

"Omi—"

Ukigumo called to him, her hard voice almost scolding, and she took a step into the room.

Masaomi seemed taken aback for a moment to hear Ukigumo speak to him, but he quickly regained his calm and smiled at her.

Misao's breath was arrested, as if he'd taken a blow to the chest.

Ukigumo sat coquettishly next to Masaomi.

There was no way she was brushing him off.

Seeing the two of them beside each other, Misao realized what the near future held.

Ukigumo glanced meaningfully at Misao, obviously wanting a word with him. Misao bowed his head and left the room. He heard Masaomi call out to him quietly, but Misao could never have turned to look back.

Don't think about it, he warned himself. Don't brood over it.

Over what?

There was no way he would find an answer when his heart was so deeply entangled.

The only thing he knew for certain was that Masaomi had contracted Ukigumo.

That's what a man like him would do.

And the fact that Masaomi had been captivated by Ukigumo was as natural as snow melting in running water.

They were beautiful together. Misao recognized how perfect it all was. But then why was his heart still so muddled?

There was a shooting pain in the middle finger of his right hand.

Misao had been daydreaming while he was heating some wine, and he had burned his hand. It didn't blister, but the piercing pain would not go away.

Misao gazed up at the bulbous moon as it floated in the night sky, wondering what he had been thinking. In the distance he heard the sound of wooden clappers.

He let out a short sigh and left the railing. As he turned to walk down the hall, a breeze from the garden gusted through his long hair, throwing it into disarray.

He frowned and pushed his troublesome hair behind his ears. He didn't have anything to tie it back, so he held it with one hand.

He went down the enclosed hallway to the stairs.

His feet stopped in almost exactly the same spot as the night before.

He blinked slowly.

Masaomi was leaning against the railing, all alone, dressed in a light robe.

He had red thread laced between his fingers; he was making shapes. Ukigumo or Sazu must have left it with him. He seemed uninterested in his moving fingers, apparently thinking about something else. But he had noticed Misao's approach and slowly turned his head.

He slipped one hand free of the thread, and it danced fitfully in the breeze.

The red thread threatened to fly away, and Misao caught it against the railing. He had to lean forward to catch it.

His bundled hair flew back in the breeze.

He went up on his tiptoes, then fell back onto his heels and let out a breath.

He held the thread out to Masaomi and looked up at him. He saw in his face that Masaomi had been waiting for him, and his heart trembled.

"I thought if I waited here, I might see you again."

"What?"

Misao's face was full of confusion, and Masaomi flicked his eyes away.

Misao felt uncomfortable. Had Masaomi ever been the one to look away from him before? It felt unnatural.

A sense of unknown dread cast its shadow over his heart.

"Would you come with me for a while?"

Misao hesitated at Masaomi's invitation, which sounded slightly tense, but he had no way to refuse. So he nodded.

He followed Masaomi away from the railing and into his room.

"Is something the matter?" Misao asked the man's wide back as they passed through the door.

Masaomi seemed in no hurry to begin talking. He didn't even look at Misao or sit down, so Misao could do nothing but stand as well, silent.

He felt awkward, and when he lowered his eyes his hair brushed over his ears. He immediately let out a small sound of annoyance and pulled his hand away from his hair. His hair had touched the burn on his finger.

Masaomi turned around and looked at him. His eyebrows knitted in concern and he turned to face Misao.

"What happened to your hand?"

Masaomi took Misao's hand, startling him.

"It's nothing serious."

Misao tried to pull his hand away, but Masaomi held fast. "Let me see it."

Masaomi laid a hand on Misao's shoulder and drew him over to sit beside a lantern.

He inspected Misao's hand in the light.

"Oh, I see it. It's all red."

"It's just a little burn."

Misao's hand still rested in Masaomi's.

"I want you to take care of yourself," Masaomi whispered, as he looked at the burn on Misao's finger.

Misao tried to laugh the comment off as overprotective, but faced with Masaomi's serious face raised solemnly to his own, he couldn't say anything.

"I think I may have offended you," Masaomi began, by way of preface. "Ukigumo told me about your situation."

Instantly, Misao's cheeks drew taut and he slipped his hand free of Masaomi's hold.

The tip of his middle finger pulsed with pain, just like his heart.

"Would you mind if I asked you about it?"

Masaomi's face was almost frighteningly earnest.

"What sort of work do you do here?"

"Do you want to hear me say that I sell my body to men?" Misao asked contemptuously. Masaomi did not deny it.

Misao was the lovechild of the most popular courtesan at the time and her lover. As soon as Misao's father had found out the girl was pregnant, he'd headed for the hills.

After that, she talked about retiring from the business and left little Misao at Oumi Tea House. He had no memory of her. Born and raised in the brothel, Misao had no relatives and he had no choice but to serve the tea house. The child of a beautiful courtesan and her lover, who had been widely rumored to be a playboy, Misao was a beautiful child, for better or worse. When he'd begun serving as a maid, the owner had become partial to him. He was taught everything from literature to the arts of the tea house, and all the expenses rested on Misao's back, to be paid off by work in the brothel.

Before he realized it, Misao was buried in debt, bound to Oumi Tea House, no different from the girls who had been sold into service there.

He wanted to be free.

And the only way he could do that was to pay off his debt to the owner.

He flirted with the customers to earn money.

Sometimes he was contracted more than the prostitutes. He knew that the girls resented him for being more successful even though he was a man. But the trick that Misao had used all this time was to give his full attention to the customer, so they would come again and again. And he had never once crossed the line.

"You've been very kind to me," Masaomi said without hesitation. "I want you to tell me how much you need to leave this place."

Misao's mouth fell open slightly and his eyes widened.

His head shook minutely, all on its own.

He was shocked himself at how afraid he was of burdening this man or causing him any trouble.

"Or is this just more of my arrogance, wanting to pay you back somehow?"

Misao gazed at Masaomi's pure face, at the heart that had thought so fervently of him.

"You gave me your handkerchief," he countered, dazed, and Masaomi's eyes fell. He was hurt.

Why is he upset?

All at once, he thought of something. His head hung down, which made it difficult to speak, but the desire bubbled out of his heart and past his lips.

"Actually, there is something..."

He lifted his head.

"Can you take me outside the gate?"

It wasn't an outlandish request and Misao need not have hesitated. Masaomi's face showed not the slightest distress.

That was the most he had done to help Misao all evening.

"All I want is one afternoon."

His voice trembled slightly with this request, even as his lips pulled into a faint smile.

Chapter Three

The wind was strong that day.

Sitting in the seat of the rickshaw that had stopped outside the tea house, Misao heard the sound of roof tiles whistling in the breeze.

He gazed down at his toes, at the socks that covered them and the wooden sandals he wore, wondering if all this was real. It didn't seem like it. And though Misao was convinced it was a dream, a lot of preparation had gone into dreaming it.

Gikuyo had roused Misao from his bed that morning, which already seemed so long ago. Apparently Masaomi had spoken with Gikuyo. He had stayed the night, then argued with her for Misao's outing the very next morning. When Misao found out about it, Masaomi was already waiting for him in his overnight room, dressed in a formal men's kimono.

"Give this to the gatekeeper."

Misao heard Gikuyo's voice as she spoke to Masaomi, and he glanced out at the front of the tea house from a small hole cut in the rickshaw's hood. They stood facing each other under the eaves, which protected them from the wind. Masaomi slipped something into his pocket. It was probably some sort of document that the tea house needed to show for Misao to be allowed outside the gate. Without it, he wouldn't be able to leave.

The owner was still in bed. Misao could imagine how he would panic when he woke and found Misao gone, and he worried a little for Gikuyo, who had given him permission to go without consulting the owner.

As if she had sensed Misao's apprehensive gaze, Gikuyo looked over and marched straight up to him. She stepped definitively onto the footboard and leaned forward, raising Misao's chin sharply with her index finger.

"Are you trying to impress people with this flaccid, uncomplicated, lovesick face?"

Gikuyo snorted loudly. Misao only stared at her blankly. Her imperious nature made him momentarily forget everything else.

Gradually, Misao's eyes sharpened. He shook his chin free of Gikuyo's finger irritably. In the same moment, he banished his concern for her. This woman didn't need anyone to worry about her well-being.

Gikuyo looked at him sardonically, then drew her face close to his. She whispered against his ear, so close he thought he could feel her lips, "Everything's going according to plan."

Misao's brows knitted dubiously and Gikuyo winked at him, then she drew back from the cart. Masaomi came up beside her and they conversed briefly.

"Thanks for waiting."

He climbed in beside Misao, his shoulders pressing against Misao's own. He raised a hand to one side of his mouth, as if he were telling Misao a secret. "She's pretty scary."

"She's a witch," Misao asserted flatly, still worked

up from the earlier outburst. But he cut himself off at once. Stealing a sidelong glance, he saw that his companion was staring straight at him. They looked at each other uncomfortably for a moment. Suddenly, Masaomi began to chuckle.

"Sorry."

Misao apologized quietly, but Masaomi lowered his head and wrapped his arms around his stomach, unable to contain himself anymore, shaking with quiet laughter. He was probably laughing at the fact that in one breath Misao had spoken so poisonously about someone, and then before the words had died on his tongue, had apologized so primly.

"You don't need to laugh that hard," Misao grumbled softly. But he finally felt like this was real.

The rickshaw rolled down the main street of the pleasure district at a quick clip.

"I can't believe it."

Misao looked down at Masaomi's hand, which covered his, and laid his other hand on top of it.

"I never imagined my wish would be granted so quickly."

He raised his eyes silently and half-turned toward Masaomi.

His tender face, which made Misao think of sunshine, gazed back at him.

"As they say, seize the day," he answered humorously. Then Masaomi turned his head back to the front and he gazed into the distance, as if to say, *Besides...*

"I won't be here much longer."

"What?"

Misao's eyes bulged slightly as he stared at Masaomi's face.

"Are you going back to Tokyo?" he asked, dazed.

Masaomi tilted his head to look at Misao, and his eyes told him "yes."

"When—?"

His voice was rough.

"Next week at the latest."

There was no hesitation in his voice and Misao knew that his mind was made up.

He felt a pit of despair yawn open in his heart. He didn't understand why he felt so desolate at the departure of this man whom he had met only two days before.

"I see."

Misao looked down for a while, and fell back against the seat with a heavy heart. He knew his face was an open book. Masaomi looked over at him pensively, but Misao had no desire to speak. He didn't even know what he would say.

The motion of the cart rocked his body slightly from side to side, then suddenly stopped. Realizing that the driver had stopped the cart, Misao looked up.

The western gate soared into the sky above.

His heart went quiet and he craned his neck out to see.

A thin film of sweat covered his palms.

A guard ran up to the cart and peered sharply under the hood at them. Misao gasped, recognizing the man's rugged face.

"Misao? You're the one from Oumi going out?"

he asked, narrowing one eye in suspicion.

Misao felt like he was going to grab his arm and drag him back to the tea house.

Staring stiffly at the man, he groped blindly to clutch at Masaomi's jacket. Masaomi rested his own hand over Misao's.

"Here."

He took the document out of his pocket and passed it to the guard. The man took his time reading it over to verify its authenticity. The thin paper rattled in the strong wind.

"Looks good."

The guard nodded and stuffed the paper into his pocket, grinning lewdly at Masaomi.

"Watch out, sir. That one tried to run away a couple of times when he was a kid. He doesn't walk too well anymore."

Masaomi looked straight ahead, not answering, and ordered the driver to continue.

Misao could see them leaving the gate behind through the window in the hood.

There was a limit to how much he could see through that window. He turned to look, irresistibly attracted by the image, but the joints in the hood got in the way, which only increased his impatience. Misao shouted at the driver, unable to contain himself.

"Stop!"

He flew out of the rickshaw as it slowed. His jacket trailing behind him, his hair swept in the same direction, Misao stared at the giant gate. Far away inside was the street he had grown up on.

Masaomi slowly drew up behind Misao as he stood there, fixated.

"I would never do anything to cause you problems, Mister Towa."

Misao turned his face into the wind to look at Masaomi.

"Never."

He swore it with utter conviction.

But Masaomi continued to stare at Misao and he shook his head with an intense look.

"I'm not worried about that. Look, your hair is getting mussed. Let's get back in the cart."

He wrapped his arm around Misao and Misao leaned against him as they walked back to the rickshaw in the powerful wind. Covered by the hood, it was like a tiny nest inside.

"Are you all right?" Masaomi asked in a whisper, and Misao nodded, hanging his head.

The rickshaw slowly began moving again.

"It was childish indiscretion. I didn't know what I would do or where I would go once I got past the gate."

His heart was being pulled back into the past.

Masaomi gazed ahead, his eyes lowered slightly. He listened in utter silence, but Misao knew he was paying attention.

"I thought once I got past the gate, I would head for the sea. But I didn't even know where the sea was."

Now that he said it, he realized how reckless he had been and he smiled at himself.

"Why the sea?"

Masaomi looked at him quietly.

"I'm not sure."

Misao turned his head, still smiling. He hadn't thought about it for a long time.

"I think I must have decided that when people travel, they go by sea."

"By sea..." Masaomi murmured, turning his face to the window. "In weather like this, the waves will be very rough."

"Really?" Misao answered vaguely, not sure how to agree with him. Masaomi stared at him.

Misao forced a smile onto his lips.

"All I've ever done is imagine it. I've never seen it."

"Would you like to?"

Misao was confused by such a casual suggestion.

"Go to the sea?"

"Yes."

"But we're supposed to see a play in Dotonbori..."

Misao began making confused excuses, then trailed off.

Masaomi waited for his response, his face entirely earnest in his suggestion.

"Can we?"

Misao's heart fluttered.

Masaomi nodded fluidly.

"We'll find a carriage in Dotonbori. It will still take a few hours to get there, though. Is that all right?"

Misao nodded, his face tense.

The carriage stopped in the shade of some pine trees. From his seat inside, Misao stared out at the sandy ground that ran on into the gray waters of the sea.

"Are you staying there?" Masaomi asked secretively, but Misao didn't answer. He sat perfectly still, riveted by the spectacular sight on the other side of the glass. He was incapable of moving.

His hands tensed unconsciously as they rested on his knees, and he trembled as if he'd seen something frightening.

"The real sea... it's not actually blue, is it?" Misao murmured in a reedy voice.

"No," Masaomi whispered back, reaching for the window fastener. "That's because the weather doesn't look very promising. The face of the ocean changes with the weather. When the sky is clear, the sea sparkles."

The window fell open with a clatter.

The air blew in, carrying a strong, salty scent that Misao had never smelled before, and with it the lamentation of the ocean.

The sensations assaulted all of his senses and Misao's eyes opened wide.

He rose.

"Misao?"

The cautious voice passed over Misao's ears unheard.

He got out of the cart. He walked unsteadily, as if he were being controlled by something.

As he walked toward the sand, his eyes swung up, his face quivering as he stared at everything around him.



A giant black pine moaned in the sea breeze. The sky was so dim it was difficult to believe it was afternoon.

He stood on the sand.

Not bothering to gather up his hair as the wind whipped it around, Misao stared wondrously at the scene before him.

The dead color of the sky was reflected in the wildly crashing waves. He watched their terrifying power.

It went on forever.

Was this how big, how open the world was?

Everything that he had tried not to see, tried not to think about beat down the door inside his mind and filled him like muddy flood waters.

Gradually, these exquisite emotions pooled in the corners of his eyes, then slipped down his cheek and fell from his face. He reached up with uneasy fingers and felt the cool wetness of his skin.

His slightly open lips trembled as he sucked in a gasping breath.

His face contorted and coughing tears spilled out of him. He wiped at his streaming cheeks and fell to his knees in the sand.

He wasn't sad.

He was only miserable.

After chafing in his narrow world for so long, he was now painfully aware of how insignificant he was. A choking cry caught in his throat. His shoulders shook noiselessly until a gentle hand touched them, chasing away the dark clouds again and again.

He had no control over himself, like a spoiled

child throwing a tantrum.

He rejected everything and closed his ears to the world. He tore at his ears with restrained hands. He twisted in resistance, but the strength that held both his wrists refused to slacken and Misao raised his tear-stained face. He saw Masaomi there, his face twisted with pain. The next moment, Misao's body was in his arms, held tightly against him.

"It's all right."

The sound of Masaomi's voice so close to him and the warmth of his arms freed the cry that had been trapped in Misao's throat.

"It's all right."

He repeated it like a spell, over and over again, as Misao sobbed against his chest.

Letting his body be rocked by the irregular rhythm of the carriage, Misao leaned against Masaomi's chest. Every once in a while his shoulders would shake with the memory of a sob. But his tears were over now.

His right cheek was warm. So was his right shoulder and the top of his left arm. Leaning against Masaomi, only those parts of him that he touched took in his warmth.

Misao didn't know what to do. He felt desolate, as if he'd just been cast out into an empty, unfamiliar place, and he was terrified of being alone.

Masaomi's chest moved under his cheek; he held Misao's head, stroking it tenderly while he still held his

shoulders with his other hand.

Misao felt jealous of the person who could have this all to themselves.

Why couldn't that be him?

"It's like a person," Masaomi murmured. His voice mixed with the gentle sound of the rain. "The sea can change its mood in an instant. Next time I'll take you to see it when it's in a better mood."

Misao blinked slowly against Masaomi's chest as he made this offer, then cautiously looked up at him. His eyes met Masaomi's pale, tender gaze.

"Next time?" Misao asked, as if in a dream.

Masaomi smiled and inclined his head in a nod. He smoothed several strands of Misao's hair from the many tracks of tears on his cheeks. He then cupped his hand gently around Misao's cheek.

"Something that's been straining inside you broke free back there."

His shapely, anxious lips drew closer and lightly kissed the corners of Misao's eyes.

The shadow cast by Masaomi's face obscured half of Misao's face, including his widened eyes.

He felt the man draw a tiny breath and Misao lowered his shaking lashes.

Where had this feeling come from? And when?

When Masaomi's lips pulled sorrowfully away from his skin, Misao buried his face in the man's chest and wrapped his arms around him.

He wanted to stay with him.

As Masaomi held Misao's upper body in his arms, a passionate conviction swept suddenly through Misao's

entire body.

He wanted to stay with him.

He wanted that, more than anything.

There were windows on every side of them, and on each and every one, innumerable drops of rain streaked down the glass, drawing out lines of water behind them.

Misao couldn't begin to guess where the carriage was right now, but still he imagined it was returning to Oumi Tea House.

He didn't want to go back.

He wanted to stay with this man just a little longer. He wanted to stay with him.

The horse's iron shoes kicked up riots of water from the rain that beat against the ground and the cart came to an abrupt halt.

Misao pulled back slightly from Masaomi's arms.

He looked out the window dismally, imagining that they had stopped outside the grand western gate. The window was clouded by the falling rain, but Misao made out an upscale Western-style inn of white brick.

"This is the hotel I'm staying at," Masaomi told him.

"What?"

Before the words were out of his mouth, a man in a raincoat opened the carriage door from the outside and bowed respectfully. He held a large umbrella up over the carriage's door.

He passed the umbrella to Masaomi as he climbed out, then Masaomi reached back for Misao. Misao laid his fingers in the man's palm and descended. Masaomi quickly wrapped his arm around Misao's shoulder and

pulled him close to protect him from the rain.

"Welcome back, Mister Towa. Do you have any luggage?"

The man's voice was cultivated. Misao saw that he was wearing a hat under his raincoat and he guessed, a bit slowly, that this was the hotel's doorman.

"No, thank you."

Masaomi shook the man's hand, then took Misao once more under his arm. Misao acted as docile as possible so as not to embarrass him, and followed Masaomi up the driveway. There was another doorman stationed beside the front door whose job it was to greet the guests. He pulled open the heavy double doors with exquisite timing.

There was a stunning burgundy carpet.

The lobby was a three-story-tall foyer in the center of the building.

Masaomi took his room key from the front desk and turned toward the stairs. Persian rugs were laid on the stairs and moldings decorated the walls in the shape of large flowers.

Masaomi led him to a room on the second floor. The wallpaper was a modern design and the room had a calm air, like a private study, but everything in the room was Western. For Misao, who had grown up somewhere so traditionally Japanese it was practically a relic of another age, there was nothing he could latch onto as familiar and comforting. It was as if he had stepped into another world.

"I'm sorry if this is forward."

Masaomi came into the room after Misao and

closed the door behind him as he spoke. Misao looked up at him as he laid a hand on his back, and Masaomi looked down at him with a feeble smile.

"But you can't very well go back with your face all a mess from crying."

"What?"

"Sit down."

He slipped his hand off of Misao's back and gestured fluidly at the sofa set in the center of the room. Masaomi walked toward a claw-footed desk at the back of the room, where there was a telephone. He picked it up and gave the number to the operator. Misao knew it was the phone number of Oumi Tea House.

"Hello, this is Towa. Could I please speak with the manager? Thank you."

He stood holding the phone for several minutes, then finally seemed to get through. He gave Gikuyo his name and thanked her for giving permission for Misao to go out.

"I'm afraid I have a very exceptional request to make in addition. I'd like for Misao to stay here with me tonight."

Misao's brain didn't react immediately and he blinked slowly two times, before his eyes widened and he caught his breath.

He stepped hesitantly toward the sofa. He held the back of it with his hand and watched how the conversation progressed. A calm reflection on things would have told him that leaving the brothel overnight would never be allowed. But even so, he couldn't help praying for the slightest chance.

"Misao? Yes, he's right here."

Masaomi caught his eye and Misao hurried over to him.

"All right, hold on a minute please."

Masaomi looked at Misao and gave a small nod, then handed him the phone.

Misao held his face firm and took it.

"Hello?"

"Is he forcing you to do this?" Gikuyo asked urgently, afraid, but Misao denied it without hesitation.

"No, I'm fine."

"That's good. Can you pass me back to Mister Towa?"

Gikuyo sounded relieved.

Misao was shocked at how quickly the interview was over and looked at Masaomi questioningly.

"She wants me to... pass her?"

He gave the phone back to Masaomi. Just then, there was a blinding flash of light from the small gap in the velvet curtains that covered the window.

A few seconds later, thunder rumbled.

"Yes, of course. I'll take full responsibility."

Misao was distracted by another round of lighting flashes, but was shocked to hear Masaomi's even voice wrap up the deal. The gap between dream and reality returned.

Masaomi hung up.

He looked at Misao mildly, and Misao's breath caught in his throat in disbelief.

"I have until they open for business tomorrow night to bring you back."

"Tomorrow *night*?" Misao cried, more out of shock than delight. "I thought *maybe* the afternoon, but tomorrow *night*? Really?"

"Yes," Masaomi answered, his calm tempering Misao's bewilderment. He untied the cord that held his jacket closed and placed it over the back of the sofa. Then he turned his face back to look at Misao casually.

"Are you hungry?"

Misao still couldn't cope with this sudden turn in events so easily. He could only answer Masaomi's question with a confused look.

"Now that I think about it, we haven't had anything to eat since this morning. Should I get us something from the restaurant downstairs? Or have something brought up?"

Masaomi made one suggestion after another and Misao felt like he had seen the real him. This was what he was like, living his life in the world outside. It wasn't a surprise that he'd had trouble navigating the muddy waters of the brothel.

He felt again what a good person he was.

"What do you want to do?"

Misao gazed into the distance silently and Masaomi smiled at him.

Before he surrendered all control to Masaomi and let him decide what to do, there was one thing nagging at Misao that he had to clear up.

"First, I'd like to know," Misao began, thinking it was one way he could find out if his fear was groundless or not, "Could I wash my face?"

Misao sat against the wash basin and drooped his head. Water poured fitfully from the faucet, which apparently didn't work very well.

"Misao?"

He heard Masaomi call to him from the other side of the door.

Misao had asked to wash his face, and so had come to this bathroom that was connected to Masaomi's room. He had been in there about twenty minutes.

When he didn't answer, Masaomi said, "I'm coming in" and pushed the door open.

"What's wrong?"

He rested his hands on Misao's shoulders and bent down to look into Misao's eyes, but Misao quickly turned away.

"Please don't look at me."

He spoke tersely, his head turned all the way to the side.

He was rejecting Masaomi, and thereby rejecting himself.

When they'd come to the room, Masaomi had said it was so Misao could wash his face—and he had been exactly right. When Misao saw himself in the mirror, his eyes were puffy and red; he was hideous. When he thought about how he had exposed himself, he just couldn't face Masaomi anymore. The fact that he had shown this shame to Masaomi only made it worse.

"I'm—I look so pitiful. I can't—"

He struggled to speak, as if all the air had been squeezed out of his body.

"It's humiliating," he managed.

"Don't be silly," Masaomi murmured, pained. He sat down across from Misao.

He laid a hand tenderly on one of Misao's cheeks.

"I find you quite attractive right now. You need someone to take care of you, someone to protect you—it's very seductive," Masaomi confessed passionately.

But to Misao it only seemed like he had used his unabashed wailing to elicit Masaomi's kindness.

That was all it had been.

Masaomi was the kindest person Misao knew, with great stores of pity. If he saw someone hurting, he wouldn't be able to resist helping.

Masaomi looked like he was waiting patiently, but finally he gave a sigh of resignation and reluctantly took his hand from Misao's cheek.

"I'll have a separate room prepared for you, so you can spend the night there. I'll have someone bring your food there as well."

Masaomi started to stand up, but Misao caught his wrist without thinking. He met Masaomi's startled eyes and when he looked up, he knew. He lowered his eyes again awkwardly, and shook his head.

It was only natural that Masaomi would tire of his selfishness. But Misao didn't want to spend the night in a separate room. That was pointless. Today was his only chance.

Masaomi sat down again and covered Misao's hands with his free one. Then he spoke very gently, saying, "Misao, I don't want to hurt your feelings. Just look: the bed here is certainly large enough, but there's only one. I've been thinking all night that I should have a

room prepared for you. Of course, I'd like to eat together if you don't mind, but that's my own selfish perspective and you don't have to do it. I don't want you to feel bad."

His suggestion overflowed with consideration, but that only made Misao dig in deeper.

"Together," he pleaded, eyes shut. "I want to stay together until morning."

That would be enough.

Just to stay by his side.

"All right."

Masaomi nodded, his words escaping on a breath. Misao felt a tender pressure on his fingertips.

"We'll stay together," Masaomi whispered, kissing Misao's fingers.

A sweet trembling began at the core of Misao's body. As he struggled to contain it, he murmured, "But... please don't look at me too much."

He added this selfish request.

He felt Masaomi chuckle.

"We'll get some ice and you can chill your skin. Don't worry. You'll be beautiful again by tomorrow."

After that, the two had their dinner together. They didn't talk much during the meal, but that was just Masaomi's custom; during the after-dinner tea, he was animated and occasionally let out a refreshing laugh. Misao rejoiced in this hitherto unknown frankness and eventually forgot all about his face.

Still, he dressed in a lighter robe and pressed a bag of ice that the front desk sent up to his eyelids. But now it had become a sort of joke and he could laugh about it.

Masaomi had done that for him.

He felt the ice break down into cold water on his closed eyelids.

Misao lay on the bed by himself, buried under a quilt.

Rain continued to fall outside the window.

Misao was thinking about a story that Masaomi had told him after dinner about a huge boat. Misao had never even seen a picture of one, let alone the real thing. He told Masaomi it made him want to ride on one, and Masaomi nodded, saying that one day he would.

Misao wondered, sad.

Even if he really could ride on a boat like that, Masaomi wouldn't be with him.

Feeling a puff of sultry steam, Misao removed the bag of ice water from his eyes.

Masaomi had just gotten out of the bath and was wearing a light summer robe. He sat on the edge of the bed. Misao sat up, and Masaomi twisted around to look at him. He drew his face closer.

The sight of his wet hair surprised Misao.

"It's back," Masaomi murmured, his eyes twinkling, stroking around Misao's eye with the back of his hand. "You're as beautiful as ever."

Misao looked away, gulping.

Masaomi pulled away and picked up the robe that lay folded on the pillow. He held it out to Misao. Misao took it dazedly and got out of bed.

He went into the bathroom, which was filled with white billows of steam.

He wiped the mirror off with a hand and checked

his face, foggily reflected back at him. What sort of face was he making? It was vacant and dreamy.

But Masaomi had called him beautiful.

This might well be the first time he had ever felt happy to have his appearance complimented.

His hand trembled against the mirror. An unbidden wish coursed through his body.

He washed himself thoroughly, and before he left the bathroom he looked once more into the mirror and took a deep breath.

He opened the door.

His fingers were tense.

"Kobe? That's much earlier than we planned. Incredible."

Masaomi was at the claw-footed desk at the back of the room. He was sitting in a chair, his legs crossed, resting his elbow on the desk as he spoke on the phone. His back was almost completely turned to Misao like this, so he didn't seem to have noticed that Misao had come out of the bathroom yet.

"Are you all surviving without me?"

Masaomi joked with the person on the other end. He was speaking more casually than Misao had ever heard him.

Masaomi barked with laughter.

"Hey, you're not allowed to laugh. No, you've been a big help, thanks. I think it would be bad to force things."

The first half of this exchange was lighthearted, but the second half was more subdued. There was a brief silence.

Misao had totally missed his chance to speak. Now it would look like he was eavesdropping and he didn't like that. He felt so uncomfortable, he wanted to run from the room.

"I haven't made any progress," Masaomi continued tranquilly on the telephone. He switched the receiver to his other ear.

"No, I was just blundering about it, and—"

Masaomi seemed to sense something behind him and turned his head in the middle of the conversation.

Misao raised his head slightly and looked at Masaomi apologetically.

"Sorry, I have to go."

Smirking at the embarrassment on Misao's face, Masaomi explained quickly to the person on the phone. He stood up and turned back to the desk.

"I'll come say hello in Kobe before I head back to Tokyo. Make the offer before I get there. Right, thanks. Okay, bye."

Masaomi hung up, then took a breath, as if shifting gears, and turned to Misao apologetically.

"Sorry. I didn't notice you."

"No, it's my fault."

Misao shook his head uncomfortably.

"I was talking to my younger brother. I left him in charge."

Masaomi walked away from the desk as he explained. He moved to the bed and sat down. He rested his left hand on the bed, gesturing to his side, and looked up at Misao with a smile.

"Come here. I'll dry your hair."

Misao's heart pounded.

He gave a slight nod, then went to Masaomi's side. He sat down silently where the man indicated.

His throat was tight and his neck stiff.

Masaomi took the towel from around Misao's shoulders and wrapped it around his wet hair.

"You have such beautiful hair," Masaomi murmured, as he wiped the water away with the towel. His voice tickled at Misao's ear. "It's so straight and manageable."

Misao's mind was a blank, searching for some response to these kind words. In the end, he wound up not answering.

If Katsuragi ever saw him like this, he would toss his head back and laugh, unbelieving. He would say that Misao pretended to be a master of love, but he was actually mastered by it.

Despite the fact that he'd been born and raised in the brothel, Misao hid a morsel of purity inside himself and Katsuragi had seen through him. That was why he had always found Misao's lascivious bravado so amusing.

The towel fell from his hair.

Masaomi touched Misao's ear with a long finger to tell him he had finished. Misao shut his eyes at the feeling of Masaomi's finger brushing over his skin.

He had always believed that a passionate gaze without control was something filthy.

But now...

He raised his trembling eyelashes and turned to look at Masaomi.

He gazed earnestly at Masaomi as Masaomi gazed back at him, a slight bewilderment showing on his face.

It didn't matter if it was a lie. He just wanted to be with this man once.

He opened his lips slightly.

"Shall we go to bed?"

He could barely speak: Misao's advance was more a series of breaths than words. Masaomi's eyes widened at it. His head moved awkwardly then, taking the hand that rested on his knee and covering his mouth with it.

The man beside him let out a deep breath.

His heart cooled and Misao gripped the robe that hugged his knees tightly around himself.

"Please don't look at me like that and say those things," Masaomi said, obviously at a loss, glancing sidelong at Misao and smiling ruefully. "I'm not that strong—I don't trust in my reason to win out."

Misao raised his eyebrows.

How was he supposed to take words as harsh as these?

It sounded like Masaomi wasn't entirely unwilling, but he wanted to refuse politely.

"It must be hard for you being told this so often."

Misao was confused. Masaomi took his hand away and turned to face him.

"Misao, I think I really do love you. So I don't want to pay for sex with you."

It took Misao several seconds to understand what Masaomi was telling him.

His lips trembled, opening and closing several times.

"You think I want—?"

Misao's voice grew harsh and his eyes widened in anger.

Masaomi looked surprised. As soon as Misao saw that, he remembered that he had never corrected his misunderstanding the night before.

As shame colored his neck, his heart broke.

Masaomi thought that Misao was a male prostitute.

When he realized that Masaomi had been looking at him like that the entire day, Misao couldn't bear it.

"You're wrong."

His eyebrows knitted together painfully and he shook his head. He looked pleadingly at Masaomi.

"I don't sell my body," he declared keenly.

Masaomi's face hardened as he gazed at him, and a few moments later he apologized.

"I'm sorry. I obviously misunderstood terribly somehow."

"What do you mean?"

Misao twisted his head in incomprehension and Masaomi answered with a harsh laugh.

"Now I've done it," he sighed, and stared up at the ceiling. "But no, I'm glad."

His eyes narrowed in a slight smile and he looked somehow relieved. But Misao could only watch him, still not understanding.

"But you..."

Masaomi started to say something, but apparently had trouble going on.

He turned back to Misao.

"I'm sure a lot of people told you that you were beneath them."

Masaomi offered this with a complicated expression. Misao gazed at him vacantly for a long moment, then lowered his eyes.

"At first everyone acts kind."

He spoke in a whisper devoid of emotion, his eyes fixated, unseeing, on the carpet. He blinked slowly, and cursed himself.

"But in exchange for their help they take off their kimonos and expose themselves to me. In the end they just want to lock me away somewhere. And compared to the girls who sell their bodies, my debt to the brothel must be cheap."

"But you refused."

"Of course I did."

Misao was emphatic.

"Spending my entire life locked away with a man I don't love is worse torture than being in the brothel."

Misao spit out his words, and Masaomi watched him carefully. Then he whispered, seriously, "I'd like to think I would be different."

"Wh—"

Masaomi's eyes left Misao's face and unfocused slightly, lost in thought.

"On the other hand, it would probably be humiliating."

Masaomi spoke as if to himself, and it pained Misao to see his face, for reasons he didn't understand.

"On the other hand'?"

Misao caught at Masaomi's words, driven by his

impatience at being left behind in the conversation.

"Do you mean there's an upside to being locked away by someone I don't love?"

He was utterly unsure of his interpretation. But the way Masaomi looked back at him in utter silence told Misao that he had it right.

Why had Masaomi's mind gone to that all of a sudden?

Masaomi smiled faintly at Misao's confusion.

"Shall we go to bed?" he asked crisply, as if trying to forget about everything.

"Excuse me?" Misao whispered.

There wasn't even a trace of eroticism in his voice, and Misao knew now that his own invitation had blown away like smoke on the air.

His heart was filled with a variety of complex emotions: regret, self-pity, relief. And it was out of the question now to ask the man to explain himself.

With a soft sigh, Misao stood up. He went around to the opposite side of the bed and got under the covers.

He gazed at Masaomi's back as he dimmed the lights.

Misao knew that he was too ambitious.

"But maybe... maybe I don't mind after all."

Misao's voice echoed with a strange sadness in the darkened room.

Masaomi got into bed beside him and cocked his head.

"What I said before—about how even if the man didn't love me... I think maybe, just being with him would be enough."

Misao looked up at Masaomi, who sat propped up against the pillows. He had spoken his real feelings just now.

Sensing that they had returned to the earlier topic, Masaomi smiled in agreement. His smile was stunning.

"How admirable."

Misao's eyes grew round at this compliment. He was so surprised his mouth fell open.

"That's the first time anyone's ever called me that."

After the initial shock wore off, he saw the humor in it.

"If Kazushi heard you say that, he wouldn't be able to stop laughing."

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Misao covered his face with his hands. His shoulders were shaking.

"Kazushi? Oh, that servant? That handsome man?"

Misao burst out laughing at that. He didn't know if Masaomi had meant it seriously or as a joke.

"When you say that, I can't help but compare you two. Kazushi definitely gets the short end of the stick in that contest!"

He looked up at Masaomi, laughing. Misao's eyes met Masaomi's, which gazed down at him seriously, and he choked off his laughter. The bed was big enough for three people to sleep in it together. There ought to have been plenty of space between the two of them, but somehow they felt very close. A thrill of surprise ran down Misao's neck.

"Mister Towa—?"

Finally, he spoke his name, and Masaomi tilted his head, still looking at Misao. "I was just thinking how carefree you looked when you were talking about him."

It took a moment for Misao to realize that he meant Kazushi.

He nodded. "I've known him a long time."

"You sound different when you talk about him," Masaomi said quietly. A small, melancholy sigh escaped him.

"Are you going to a special effort for me? Because I'm a customer?"

Misao's head was sunk into the pillow, but he shook it ever so slightly.

You're wrong.

He cared for Masaomi.

And even if he had known exactly why, he wouldn't tell him.

"Well, you sounded totally different when you were talking to your brother on the phone before."

Masaomi looked a little embarrassed at Misao's point. It was sort of cheating.

"He's a relative."

"Kazushi is like a relative to me."

Masaomi smiled slightly at Misao's answer. "I see."

He lay down fully.

"Well, at least—"

He gazed up at the ceiling as he spoke, his face turned very slightly toward Misao. He had a gentle, teasing smile.

"Call me Masaomi."

Misao's lips parted slightly. He pulled the quilt up very slightly to hide it.

He waited for Masaomi's eyes to turn back to the ceiling.

Then he whispered secretly, "Masaomi."

He saw the man's face flicker for a moment.

The silence that filled the room let them know that the rain had stopped.

Masaomi folded the arm closest to Misao behind his head and spoke in a very controlled voice. "If I try anything funny, I want you to hit me," he joked, still looking at the ceiling.

Misao hid the tight, painful squeezing of his heart and forced a laugh.

He ran frantically, barefoot.

He ran across small bits of gravel, which cut his feet and made them bloody. But since his face and body were covered with injuries, he could no longer tell which part of him hurt.

He was afraid to look behind him, and ran on, clinging to what he saw ahead.

He passed several shop lights burning in the darkness at the edge of his vision.

He stumbled and fell many times. The scrapes on his palms and knees grew deeper each time.

His breath made a white cloud in front of him, and through it he could see the great western gate that he

sought drawing closer.

There were two men in front of the gate, blocking it.

Let me through!

He ran haphazardly between the men.

They caught his shoulders on both sides and twisted his arms behind him and forced him to his knees.

His wide eyes saw the gate soaring into the sky just above him.

He stretched his mouth open to its limit.

Let me out!

The sound of his voice reverberating inside his head woke Misao up.

He put a hand to his forehead.

His heart was pounding fast.

He saw an unfamiliar ceiling. A moment later, the entire day's events replayed in Misao's mind and he looked hesitantly over beside him.

There he saw the man's face, handsome in sleep, and he sighed in relief.

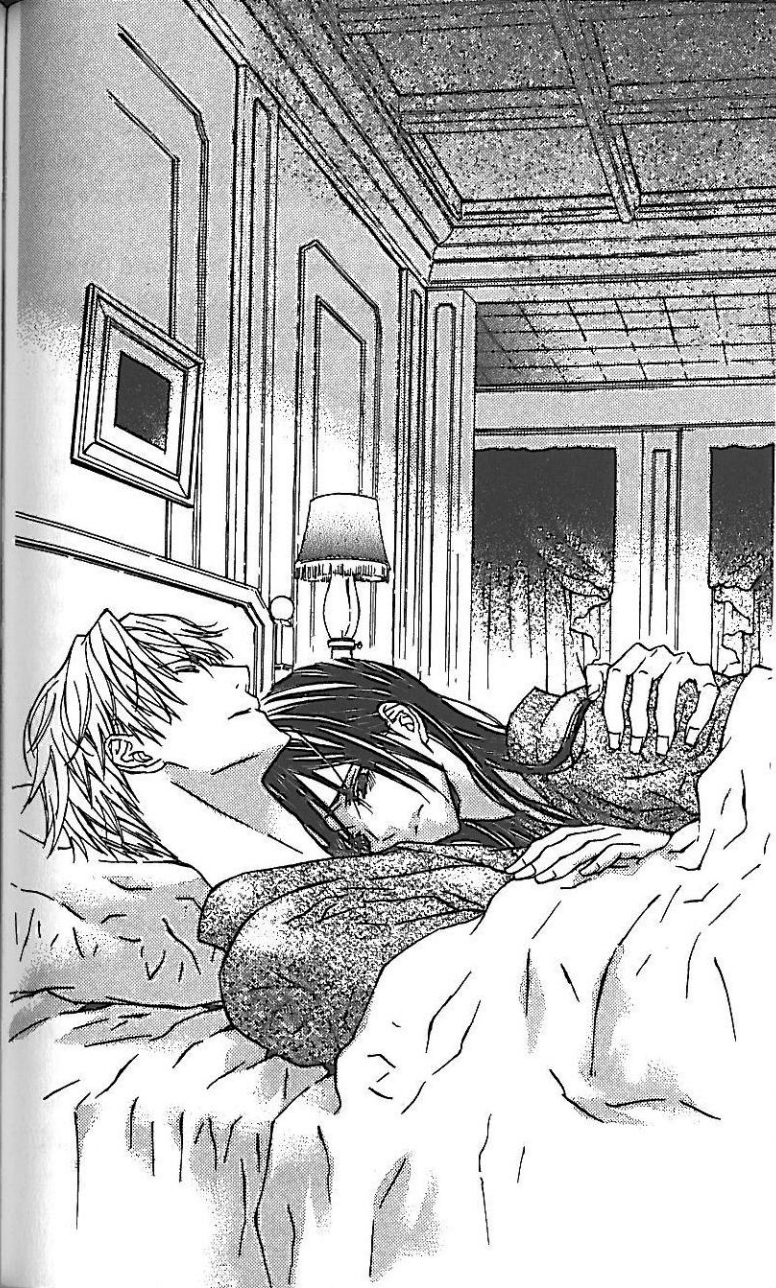
But still his feeling of helplessness did not go away. So Misao gently moved over to lie on top of the man's chest.

He was warm.

Misao's heart filled itself with his kind warmth.

He wanted to hold Masaomi, and to be held.

He pressed his lips against the cloth of Masaomi's robe rather than let the desolate sigh he felt rising escape



them. He closed his delicately trembling eyelashes. Misao felt a hand begin to slowly stroke his hair, and when he drew himself closer to the man's body, Masaomi wrapped an arm around his frail shoulders.

Misao let his eyes roam freely and he gazed up at Masaomi, afraid that he had woken him up. But set deep within his flawless face, his eyelids remained shut.

Chapter Four

Matching the music of the samisen the geisha played, the two young apprentices danced with fans, their long sleeves swaying.

The girls were under Seno'o, taking advantage of the absence of their older sister to introduce themselves through this dance. Katsuragi sat before the stage lazily smoking a pipe, one leg propped up. Sitting diagonally across from him, Misao watched the girls dance too, but there was only one thing on his mind. His heart was somewhere else.

He distractedly served Katsuragi wine when the man held his cup out to him. Katsuragi drained the cup in a single gulp, then smirked at how unhappy Misao looked.

"Late night?" he asked sarcastically.

Misao poured him more wine and fixed his eyes on the bottle before responding dully, "I lost someone."

Seemingly bored with Misao's unusual lassitude, Katsuragi set his fresh cup of wine on the butterfly table unconsumed. Instead, he packed tobacco into his pipe and blew a cloud of purple smoke into Misao's face.

"I heard you left the brothel to spend time with a man, you saucy boy. Your boss was awfully nice to let you do that."

Katsuragi's mouth was bent in a smile, but he

spoke so quickly that there was no chance to respond. Misao turned his face away, pretending to find the smoke irritating. His eyes rested on the new girls, their fans twirling in the air.

He was jealous of the way the dancers seemed to have forgotten the world.

He wanted to dance like that. He didn't want to think.

The purple smoke filled his eyes and made them burn.

"I heard the man went up to a girl's room not five minutes after bringing you back here. And today is their third meeting, isn't it?"

Katsuragi sounded more surprised than happy, and he gave a wry smile. Misao balled his hands up tightly on his knees.

He had to know how hurt Misao was.

The third meeting...

The first time that the customer was allowed into the courtesan's inner circle and she would become willing to loosen her belt for him.

Tonight, Masaomi would sleep with Ukigumo.

"You tried to get one over on him, but he got you instead," Katsuragi said quietly, as if reciting a poem. The smoke had stopped billowing from his pipe, and he tapped it lightly on the edge of his ashtray to loosen the tobacco.

He was implying that Misao had pursued this affair as some sort of game, and that he had come out the loser. But Misao had never thought of it like that.

His face hard and vacant, Misao cast a silent,

apathetic glance at him, but Katsuragi only puffed at his pipe. The tiny pile of ashes fluttered on its tray.

"Master Katsuragi?"

Kazushi appeared in the hallway.

"Could I borrow Misao for a few minutes?"

"Who wants him?"

Katsuragi twirled the pipe in his fingers.

"I really couldn't say," Kazushi answered reluctantly, stealing a glance at Misao before returning his eyes to Katsuragi. "The customer isn't interested in any substitutes, though."

Kazushi's explanation sent sparks flying across Misao's vision. His expression changed instantly and he rose. It was a reflexive response to the knowledge that Masaomi was asking for him.

Katsuragi's eyes narrowed at the change in Misao's behavior, then he jerked his head at Kazushi. "Fine. Take him."

"Thank you." Kazushi dipped his head. "I believe Seno'o will be back soon."

Katsuragi snorted at Kazushi's attempt to placate him.

"I don't need any empty promises. Take the lovesick puppy and go."

He spoke imperiously, leaning on his folded knees. Kazushi called Misao over.

Misao bowed a hasty goodbye and hurried from the room. He followed Kazushi, who looked positively dumbfounded, down the hall. This was the third night, so Misao knew Masaomi had been shown to Ukigumo's room. It was the finest bedroom in the brothel, and

connected to a tea room.

Misao stopped at the end of the hallway.

He stood outside a corner room whose door frame was decorated with bamboo carvings. The room commanded a view over the railing of the tiled roofs of the district, but its doors were firmly shut.

Misao heard Masaomi's muffled voice coming from inside. Ukigumo's voice mingled coldly with his. The spring breeze played through Misao's fine hair as he stood outside the door.

There was a surprisingly large gap in the door's frame, but it was hard to hear through.

"What's wrong?" Kazushi asked as he came down the hall, looking disappointed. "You were falling all over yourself to get here. Why are you still standing there?"

He sounded surprised and stood next to Misao, then dropped to his knees in a practiced motion. Misao looked down at him, then, drooping his eyelashes heavily, he sat down formally as well. He let out a long, slow breath and sat up straight.

"Excuse me."

Kazushi spoke loudly, so they would hear him inside the room, then pulled the door open without the slightest hesitation.

"Ukigumo, we need you."

After he heard Kazushi call Ukigumo out, Misao slid into view past the doorframe. Ukigumo whispered something into Masaomi's ear, then stood up gracefully.

Masaomi nodded slightly and watched her go. His face was filled with the pain of imagining Ukigumo going off to see another customer.

It assaulted Misao's heart mercilessly.

Kazushi moved behind the doorframe, becoming invisible to those inside the room, then murmured Ukigumo's next destination to her as she emerged with her maid. He started to lead her away.

Ukigumo looked back, only barely turning her head.

Misao continued sitting outside the tea room, and Ukigumo stared at him without saying a word.

How many customers had Ukigumo's face taken prisoner, with its faint but real stability? Her eyes could see through any lie, Katsuragi had once said, scowling. Katsuragi was the only customer to have had a second meeting with Oumi Tea House's premier courtesan.

Misao wondered what he must look like to her now.

Just a simple paramour, no doubt.

"Misao?"

A voice called to him from the room, and Ukigumo's slender white neck shifted as she retreated silkily down the hall.

"What's the matter? Come in."

As if pulled in by Masaomi's command, Misao turned to face him.

He sat with his back to a folding screen, sitting at ease in camel-colored trousers. He looked concerned at Misao's reluctance to come in.

He had removed his flocked coat, but otherwise he was dressed exactly as he had been when he'd brought Misao back for the start of business that evening. But in a few short hours, he would change into a robe to

prepare for bed. And soon after that, the robe would fall from his broad shoulders.

Misao's nerves no longer controlled the rest of his body, as if a poison were gradually spreading through him. He realized he was staring at his knees. When had he done that? A shadow fell over them and camel-colored legs entered his vision before kneeling beside him.

"Do you feel sick?"

Masaomi's voice was filled with concern. Misao rolled his eyes up from his knees as far as Masaomi's chest.

He was wearing a dark brown vest.

That very morning Misao had awoken on that chest; but now it seemed impossibly far away.

It was like waking from a dream.

"Misao?"

Masaomi stroked Misao's right cheek with the back of his fingers and Misao's eyes trembled.

He reached out timidly to touch the man's vest. He felt the solidity of the man's chest beneath the costly fabric.

Misao leaned forward slightly.

He rested a cheek against the man's chest, and Masaomi held Misao's head against him.

Why did he feel like crying? This was a feeling totally unlike the emotions that had filled him upon seeing the raging expanse of the sea.

"You can lie down inside," Masaomi said kindly. But at the same moment, they heard Kazushi call out to Masaomi uncomfortably from behind them.

Misao held his breath and pushed instantly

away from the chest he had taken refuge in. In contrast to Misao's flurry, Masaomi showed no signs of embarrassment. He looked down the hall with his normally calm expression.

Kazushi was crouching in the hall, his hands on his knees and his head bowed.

"I'm sorry for all these interruptions. Someone has insisted on seeing Misao briefly."

"What? You mean he has to go to another room?"

Masaomi frowned.

Misao realized that he had still not properly explained to Masaomi what it was he did at the Oumi Tea House. But this didn't seem like a good time to start.

"It's Katsuragi, isn't it? Why does he want to see me again after he gave me permission to go?" Misao asked angrily.

"Well, you see," Kazushi began weakly, his lips twisting. "He just told me to bring you back at once. He said that if you didn't come back, he would go home."

Misao realized Katsuragi had outsmarted him.

He would let him taste the empty promise of being with Masaomi, then pull him away. That had been his plan all along.

Misao knew that even now, Katsuragi was chuckling at how perfectly it had worked out.

"I can't believe that man," Misao muttered hatefully as he began to rise.

He suddenly felt Masaomi's hand gripping his arm.

Masaomi didn't seem to believe that he could actually stop him, but his lips parted slightly and

hesitation shone in his eyes. Masaomi's face was clouded and disconsolate as he stared at Misao.

"Are you going?"

There was the shadow of an accusation in his question and Misao dropped his eyes sorrowfully to his arm. He laid his hand gently over Masaomi's as it held onto him.

Don't ask me that...

"You won't go home if I don't stay with you, will you, Masaomi?" he teased quietly.

Misao felt the trembling that Masaomi tried to hide through his grip on his arm.

He pressed his lips tightly together.

After all, Masaomi's interest in Oumi Tea House lay in Ukigumo—not Misao.

"Manager—"

Following close on Kazushi's whisper came the rasping sound of socks shuffling over the wooden floor of the hall. When Misao turned to look, she was standing behind him.

"I'm very sorry, we're having some problems tonight."

Gikuyo smoothed her kimono as she dropped to her knees. Masaomi sat up a little straighter at this and put his hands on either side of his hips, then bowed profusely.

"I've been making so many selfish demands of you the past several days."

"Would you like for me to attend you?" Gikuyo asked with a seductive smile.

Kazushi came up beside Misao and laid a gentle

hand on his shoulder. It was time to go.

"Misao—"

Misao stood and was turning to walk away when Masaomi called to him, turning his single-minded gaze onto him.

"I want you to come see me whenever you can."

Misao pressed his lips together firmly and nodded. He wanted so badly to linger, but he turned his back and forced himself to walk down the hall. Kazushi followed after, then came up beside him. He drew his mouth close to Misao's ear, forcing a hesitant grin.

"I've never seen such a docile performance from you."

"What does that mean?" Misao muttered back, neither stopping nor turning to look at him.

Kazushi gave a short laugh.

"Don't be coy. I saw how you were clinging to him."

Misao stopped suddenly and Kazushi turned to look at him curiously. As he stared at Misao, his mouth dropped open.

Normally, Misao would have deflected such jeering with a snort or some other impudent gesture. So Kazushi must have been shocked to see him now, looking so vulnerable, barely keeping his anger in check. Kazushi gaped at Misao, who looked so ashamed, but suddenly seemed to think of something. He whispered very low, "You're joking, right? I'm not laughing."

"I don't care if you laugh or not," Misao shot back awkwardly, then turned to go. But Kazushi caught his shoulder and turned him back around to face him. He

berated Misao harshly with the force of the gesture.

"Are you stupid? Quit babbling! That guy's about to join the courtesan's entourage tonight! Where do you think you are?"

"Don't you think I know that!" Misao shouted, not letting him finish.

Kazushi looked into Misao's face as he struggled against his pain, and he choked himself off.

Silence fell between them.

"I know it."

Misao's voice was so thin that it seemed to disappear in the strains of a song they heard through the walls. He held his upper arm, squeezing the same place that Masaomi had held only moments before.

Kazushi let out a sigh that seemed to say everything and patted Misao on the back. "Anyway, right now you have to go back to Katsuragi."

His voice was kind and soothing. Kazushi picked up two trays that had been set out in the hall and balanced them on his shoulders, returning to work. Misao, left alone now, turned unenthusiastically toward Seno'o's room, where Katsuragi waited.

The doors were all thrown open and Katsuragi had an apprentice girl on either side of him laughingly filling his cup.

Misao stood menacingly over the tray. Katsuragi glanced up at him as he knocked back his drink, a cruel smile on his face. *Look at the entertainment I managed to find*, he seemed to say. Misao gazed into his face and quietly spit his words out. "I hope you die."

The girls' eyes widened in shock.

"What a thing to say, Misao!"

"How scary!"

Between the two trembling girls, Katsuragi roared with laughter.

"I'm lighting the lanterns," Misao announced as he entered the bedroom.

The beds were sectioned off by screens, but these were mostly for decoration and the piles of cushions were easily seen through the large gaps in the wood.

Patrolling the rooms after the Hour of the Rat was routine and the customers paid it no mind. Misao, working as a servant, turned a blind eye to the things he saw.

On the thick beds, he saw men's backs, bare white legs wrapped around their waists dangling red underwear, the movement of their muscles showing their vigor. The moment Misao overlaid the image of two other people on those shapes, he was so revolted with himself that he felt nauseous. He covered his mouth with his hand, which stank of lamp oil, and ran out of the room. Masaomi had offered him crumbs of affection on the other side of this railing, but he wasn't careless enough to say so.

Mold had overgrown his damp heart, making it difficult to breathe, but still he couldn't leave his work unfinished. Misao went to all of the rooms he was responsible for, lighting the lanterns. When he left the last one, he glanced up at the night sky. It was perfectly clear, shining with starlight. It showed no trace of the

violent storm of the night before.

He walked down a hallway. He heard the wooden clappers sounding the time, and a sense of déjà vu washed over him.

He approached the central garden through a gap in the hall.

His hope and disappointment were all mixed up and his heart beat chaotically.

He let his eyes sink down.

Misao surrendered his body to the breeze that blew through the garden and slowly lifted his head.

Desperately, he looked up at the railing.

The person he sought was not there.

When it was nearly time to open shop that afternoon, Misao sat formally, gazing emptily at the pale shadows cast on the floor by the setting sun. At Misao's knees lay Katsuragi, his head propped on one hand. He wore a luscious kimono about his naked shoulders, a thing Katsuragi had readied for himself. There was also an entire outfit of fine kimono fit for a courtesan, including high-quality lacquered combs and other hair ornaments. Katsuragi had brought these various expensive engagement gifts today not for his favorite, Seno'o, but for Misao.

When Katsuragi had arrived unusually early that afternoon, Seno'o had at first greeted him effervescently, but confronted by this cruel joke, she had wailed and gnashed her teeth, then shut herself in a back room and

refused to come out.

"I don't understand why you want to spend your fortune on stupid games like this," Misao grumbled unhappily. Katsuragi snorted and picked up the pipe he'd tucked behind his ear. He pointed snippily at Misao's head with the bowl of the pipe.

"Hey, isn't that hairstyle supposed to be a little rounder on the sides? And a little wider too, like a butterfly wing."

The young hairdresser who was brushing Misao's hair with perfumed combs seemed to be considering Katsuragi's suggestion. He mumbled "like a butterfly's wings?" to himself, and reflected for a moment before making a sound of comprehension.

"You mean like the one Ukigumo had?"

"Now now, it's a little early for that."

Katsuragi tapped his pipe happily against the floor. Misao stared down at him in annoyance.

"Now I understand."

He flung his explosive anger at Katsuragi quietly.

"You just want to beat me down, don't you?"

"Watch your tongue. You should be a little more polite to me," Katsuragi said lazily.

Misao's face strained with his sorrow.

"You're not going to let me complain, and still force me to dress up like a girl? Who do you think would submit to that kind of treatment and still be polite to you?"

Misao railed at him, but Katsuragi only smirked.

"It's not my fault the boss had his head turned and jumped on board. He's a pervert."

The hairdresser cleared his throat loudly at Katsuragi's insult of the tea house's owner.

Katsuragi took his wallet out of his sleeve and tossed fifty yen onto the floor. It landed right beside the hairdresser. It was hush money. What a horrible way to use his money.

"I can't believe you."

Katsuragi went on, looking utterly innocent. "You're the one who decided to dress as a woman anyway, right? You're very good at using makeup, by the way."

"It's not at all the same thing," Misao said reproachfully.

He had never felt ashamed to dance women's roles. The fan became an extension of his arm, and he'd worn his fingers to blisters polishing his art. He had even grown his hair out so he could have a natural hair style. He had done everything for the art. Not for this crass charade.

"Oh, and about your..."

Katsuragi held up his thumb, an incorrigible look on his face.

"I hear he comes every single day. Any man who comes to a brothel must be real voracious. It must be a lot more tempting than the girls on the street, huh?"

What a creep.

This entire thing had been a game of Katsuragi's. This realization outraged Misao.

He shut his eyes and took a deep breath. Then, trying to expel the frustration, he slowly released the breath. He opened his eyes, expressionless. He fixed his

eyes on a distant point and pretended he was speaking to someone besides Katsuragi.

Katsuragi snorted and lazily pushed himself up. He packed tobacco into his pipe, then pushed the bowl close to a flame to light it.

He puffed on the pipe with curling lips.

"How can someone who's seduced one—or is it two, or three, or four guys?—be getting so weak-kneed now?"

The purple smoke billowed up with his caustic comment.

Misao blinked once and was silent.

Even if he argued badly, it would only put him at a disadvantage.

When Misao thought Katsuragi was talking about something completely beside the point, Katsuragi would land a critical hit with his next blow and then calmly tell him he had only been joking. And before he knew it, Misao would take a heavy hit. That was all Katsuragi knew of human nature, probably. How impossible.

"All done," the hairdresser announced, wiping his hands on a rag.

Misao realized that his head felt much heavier. Dangling silver ornaments caught the light at either corner of his vision. It strained his eyes terribly.

"Thank you," Katsuragi said, sliding his payment to him. The hairdresser picked it up along with the hush money and slipped it all into his sleeve with practiced ease. He smiled at Katsuragi and bowed.

"Certainly, sir."

Neither Misao nor Katsuragi looked at the

hairdresser as he hurried from the room.

An unpleasant silence descended on them.

Misao was sure he was the only one who felt it. Katsuragi was completely unconcerned.

Misao looked up at the door.

The sun was dimming. The afternoon shift would be over soon. There was less than two hours before the night shift began.

He wondered if Masaomi would come again that night.

He was lost in his conflicting thoughts.

Misao wanted to see Masaomi, but he didn't want him to come. Both of those feelings stubbornly refused to give ground.

He had never believed that in only a few days—no, a single moment—a person's heart could be so thoroughly conquered. And it would take so long to rebuild.

He heard Katsuragi's pipe tapping against the ashtray. Misao turned his head sluggishly. Katsuragi was looking at him out of the corner of his eye in boredom.

"What are you doing?"

Katsuragi's eyes glinted. "Would you strip for me?"

Misao glared silently at Katsuragi. Then he turned his face back to the front and stood up resolutely. He untied his belt without even thinking about it. He threw his top kimono onto the floor. When he was down to the final layer of clothing, Misao stood menacingly in front of him. But Katsuragi barely spared him a disinterested glance as he lit a fresh bowl of tobacco.

He exhaled the smoke to one side, his face twisted

as if it tasted bitter, and he remarked apathetically, "You don't wear women's underwear too, do you?"

"What do you care?" Misao asked sourly, looking away.

Katsuragi took a slow drag on the pipe and paused.

He looked at Misao through the billowing smoke and smirked.

"Ridiculous."

Misao rouged his lips with the tip of his ring finger.

Kazushi sat with one knee propped up, holding the mirror up for Misao. He was slowly narrowing his left eye in distaste.

"You're scary," he mumbled.

Misao finished coloring his lips and traced the corners of his eyes in red, then looked away from the mirror. He raised one eyebrow in annoyance and Kazushi looked back at him with the same expression.

Misao sighed with something close to resignation and grazed his fingers over the face in the mirror.

"Thanks. I'm done."

"What a disaster."

Kazushi's voice was sympathetic as he set Misao's mirror aside and stood up.

They were in the men's bedroom on the first floor of the brothel. It wasn't a very big room, and there were several futons stacked up in a corner. Just before the

night shift had started, the men had come in and out of the room with utter disregard, covertly laughing at Misao's situation. But now it was quiet.

Everyone knew that the reason Misao worked at the Oumi Tea House was because he was a favorite of the owner. So none of the workers ever did or said anything too bad to Misao, in case it angered the owner. But that just meant they didn't do it to his face. They did it out of his sight, which got on his nerves, of course. Kazushi was the only exception. Maybe because he was closest to Misao in age. Ever since his first big fight with Kazushi, they had been close. That had happened seven years ago—ancient history.

Kazushi went back to work, so Misao was alone in the room.

He wiped off his ring finger, still stained with his makeup, on a bit of paper he'd kept on his knee. He slipped the rest into the inner pocket of his kimono.

He stood up. The long train of his kimono dragged on the floor with a heavy swish.

Misao laid both hands on the doors to the adjacent room and opened them wide.

Katsuragi was lying on the floor, his head propped in his right hand as he served himself some wine. He looked up at Misao and drained his cup.

Earlier, in Seno'o's room, Misao had allowed Katsuragi to provoke him and had gone so far as to throw his discarded underwear at the man's feet. At that very instant, Seno'o had come out of hiding.

Of course, in her rage Seno'o had chased Misao away, and Katsuragi as well. So now they were here.

Really, it was a stupid story.

"They've opened for business. How long do you plan to lie there?" Misao asked coldly. He wasn't hiding how he felt.

"What are you talking about? Obviously I've been waiting for you to get ready."

Katsuragi sat up ponderously and stretched his neck. Misao was sure he hadn't actually strained any muscles. He sighed.

"All right, let's go."

Katsuragi slipped past Misao and into the men's bedroom. Misao followed him with his eyes. "Go where?"

"Seno'o's room, of course. She is my favorite, after all," Katsuragi answered coolly, his back still turned. He walked through the bedroom and into the hall.

He seemed entirely unconcerned by the thought of Seno'o's anger.

"He's got some nerve," Misao muttered, as he too left the bedroom. The hall opened into a veranda and continued past the garden. The sun had fully set now. Parties had already begun on the second floor and Misao could hear the singing and general excitement.

"If only you'd been born as a girl, you could have had all that."

Without turning to look at him, Katsuragi suddenly interrupted his thoughts.

"Oh?" Misao asked, tutting. "You're the one who made me dress up like this, so could you please stop saying such awful, selfish things?" Misao packed as many reproaches into his response as he could.

The man stopped walking.

He turned his face back to look at Misao. His expression was much more decent than he'd expected.

"If you'd been born as a woman, you would have been even more beautiful and unhappy. Since you're a man, there's still hope for you."

Misao stared at him, wondering what he meant. By the time he realized, Katsuragi had begun walking again.

"You're just doing it to amuse yourself," he muttered to the man's back.

"Of course I am," Katsuragi answered indifferently. "Why would I pay for something that wasn't amusing?"

What did he mean by that?

Misao felt sick, as if he were riding something that swayed and bucked unpredictably. If he took Katsuragi at his word, this would end badly. There was nothing lucky about it.

They crossed an arched bridge and stood before the grand staircase. Misao came to a sudden stop then. Katsuragi twisted his head around to look at him, as if he'd sensed something. Misao was peering over Katsuragi's other shoulder, looking intently at the front door of the tea house.

Masaomi was coming toward them, wearing his flocked coat and discussing something with Ukigumo. They were only a few feet away.

Masaomi's gaze shifted from Ukigumo, and he saw Misao. But Masaomi gave him only a polite smile, as if they were merely acquaintances meeting on the street. Then he tried to look smoothly away. In fact, he

did look away from Misao's face. But then he blinked and turned back. He appeared shocked.

"Misao?"

Masaomi left Ukigumo's side and hurried up to Misao. Misao had no idea what sort of expression he should wear, but he turned his entire body to the side. His ears burned. He hadn't expected to be this shy.

"Ahh," Katsuragi said from the sidelines, looking at Masaomi with a smarmy smile. "So you're the one who doesn't take any substitutes."

He was astoundingly rude considering this was their very first meeting.

Masaomi looked past Misao at Katsuragi and narrowed his eyes slightly, then inclined his head. He didn't look as if his mood had been punctured, but rather as if he wasn't quite sure what Katsuragi had meant. Misao, on the other hand, hated Katsuragi for it and slapped his arm.

"Don't be stupid," he chided under his breath. Katsuragi looked entirely unrepentant and twisted his mouth into a smile, raising one eyebrow at Masaomi. This time Masaomi's face clearly showed his displeasure. He glowered and looked over at Misao.

"Why are you dressed like that?"

His voice sounded almost accusatory, and Misao hesitated.

He couldn't answer.

He could never explain.

"Because I paid for it," Katsuragi cut in. His voice was sardonic, as if amazed at how naïve Masaomi must be to not understand that.

"You paid—?"

The expression disappeared from Masaomi's face.

What...?

Misao's heart fluttered at the tense atmosphere.

"Omi?"

Ukigumo, who had watched the proceedings in silence until then, called out demurely to Masaomi. Behind her, holding up the train of her kimono, Sazu stood gaping at Misao.

"You go ahead."

Masaomi raised a hand and answered her without looking. His gaze was fixed unswervingly on Katsuragi.

Her features as placid as the surface of a lake, Ukigumo caught Sazu's eye and they slowly ascended the staircase.

This was a bizarre development.

"How much?" Masaomi asked, his words hard against his emotions. "How much did you pay for him?"

Hearing those words, Misao finally realized how horribly Masaomi had misunderstood.

"Well now—" Katsuragi answered patronizingly, smirking thoughtfully. "All together, I'd say it came to three hundred and twenty yen."

"I'll pay twice that. For you to leave him alone," Masaomi shouted instantly, open hostility plain on his face. Misao's eyes nearly popped.

"Masaomi!"

"Be quiet!" Masaomi shouted sharply without looking at him.

Misao felt the anger gushing out of the man.

"Thanks."

Katsuragi gave Misao a little shove. Misao stumbled and almost fell, but Masaomi caught him in one arm and brought him to his chest. But it felt very different from the sensation he had experienced so many times before now. He felt like he was being treated in a very business-like way. The hair on the back of his neck stood up, as if someone had dropped ice on it.

"You can pay me later. You can have that."

Katsuragi jerked his chin at Misao, then started climbing to the second floor, his business with them completed.

"Oh, by the way."

When he'd gotten halfway up the stairs, he turned around, as if he'd just remembered something.

"A nice old gentleman by the name of Sakai who's very fond of Misao is coming soon, so could you leave his clothes on until he gets here? He really wanted to see it."

Misao was ready now for any horrible thing that Katsuragi might say. But the coolness in the hand that held his shoulder and the blankness on the face he saw above him were enough to hurt him.

Masaomi said nothing.

Katsuragi snorted. It was like a laugh, but since he turned around as soon as it was out of him, it was hard to say for sure.

Masaomi removed his hand from Misao's shoulder and fell back a step.

"Masaomi—"

Misao called to him, but Masaomi turned his face away; he wouldn't look at Misao. Misao watched his flocked coat walk away in silent shock for a long moment.

He took a shuddering breath and when it caught in his throat, he ran up the stairs after him.

He caught up with Masaomi on the second floor.

"Please don't misunderstand."

Misao tried desperately to explain, but Masaomi refused to listen. He didn't even glance at Misao.

"Masaomi!"

He didn't stop, and Misao's face contorted at the sheer coldness of his retreating figure.

Still, he pleaded with him desperately.

"I don't care about the money. I'll pay it back to Katsuragi!"

"Katsuragi—"

Masaomi repeated in a murmur, coming to a stop. He turned a frighteningly lucid expression on Misao.

"I've heard that name before."

His anger flared white-hot.

That was all the explanation he gave for a long, burning instant. He said nothing else.

"Omi?"

Ukigumo approached elegantly from the hallway that surrounded the interior garden. Sazu and one of the men from the tea house trailed after her. Her mincing steps stopped in front of Masaomi.

"I have come to escort you to the room, sir."

Ukigumo spoke modestly, her eyes raised only to the level of Masaomi's lips.

"After you, if you please, sir."

Masaomi lowered his face slightly in obvious self-loathing and let out a short sigh.

"I'm sorry."

Ukigumo looked up at him in silence. She slowly blinked her clear eyes once, then turned them to Misao.

He didn't want to face her. But still, he couldn't look away. Maybe because part of him sensed that this was a competition. If he looked away, it would be like acknowledging his guilt.

"How beautiful," Ukigumo whispered, her eyes rapturous. She took a step forward, her kimono sweeping behind her. "Work well."

As she passed Misao, she left him with these cool words.

He was astounded.

She hadn't confronted him at all.

Did her unwavering assurance come from the fact that Masaomi cared for her? She looked as if she had absolutely no need to worry about Misao, whom Masaomi was only a little fond of. He watched Masaomi disconsolately as Ukigumo left, expecting to see him miserably watch her disappear. Instead, he was surprised to find Masaomi looking at him, a complex expression on his face.

It was a shock.

Misao was flustered. Shutting off all the emotion in his face, Masaomi called to him. "Let's go."

Of course, Misao fell in behind him without argument, but it was not an atmosphere that encouraged him to speak.

They walked down the hall and Masaomi led them unerringly to Ukigumo's tea room. He was clearly already in Ukigumo's inner circle. It was difficult to contain the searing pain of that fact, and Misao's eyelids drooped.

Wine had already been laid out when they reached the room, but Masaomi did not sit down at the table; instead, he continued on to the window. It was wide enough for several people to sit all at once.

The shutters were open, allowing a playful night breeze to steal in.

Masaomi sat on the edge of the windowsill.

"It's so red."

Masaomi said this as he gazed out at the pleasure district.

"Everywhere you look in this place, you see red."

His face twisted painfully and he looked desperately up at Misao, who could only stand there.

"I feel like I'm going crazy."

Misao had not the faintest idea how to respond to this.

He didn't recognize this man.

"Let me take your jacket."

His voice shook.

Masaomi stood up without a word, so Misao walked over to help him. As he was reaching for his collar, the man's hands took strong hold of his fingers.

Misao gasped.

"Why?" Masaomi asked, his forehead wrinkling in intense pain.

"You told me you weren't a male prostitute. I was

so glad to learn that. I believed you. Why did you say that?"

"You believed—?" Misao smiled as he repeated the words. But his lips began trembling instantly and he shouted. "It was all a lie!"

The tremor that ran through Masaomi's eyes at this show of rage did not escape Misao's notice. He glared into those eyes and tore open his kimono with one hand.

He was practically in tears.

"Katsuragi said he paid, but he meant he bought this kimono. He never told you he paid for my body, did he? So why did you think that's what he meant? Huh? Why? Do you even know?"

Masaomi sucked in a breath and Misao knew he was holding it in.

He awkwardly released his grip on Misao's wrists.

He was sad.

The wail of his heart came quietly to his lips.

"Because that's what you thought I was."

Masaomi's thin eyelids finally broke his gaze on Misao as they fell over his eyes. He hung his head. After a long sigh, Masaomi shook his head weakly and put a hand to his head. He sat back down at the window.

"You're right. I thought I wouldn't care even if you were a prostitute. But—"

Masaomi raised his head to look at Misao. His lips quirked sadly.

"When I was actually confronted with the idea, I just couldn't think straight anymore. I'm sorry."

Misao pushed back his tears and stared at Masaomi for several seconds, then the tension suddenly broke inside him and he laughed sadly.

"You almost sounded like you were jealous."

As Misao realized what it meant to truly be on the brink of tears, he whispered his forgiveness to Masaomi.

He wasn't going to lecture him anymore. He just wanted to laugh about it and forget it. But Masaomi nodded seriously.

"Yes. I *was* jealous."

Misao's mouth fell open slightly.

He felt as if he might sink to the floor.

What was this man telling him?

A faint, breathy voice passed his lips. "Are you just trying to trick me, Masaomi?"

"What?"

Misao smiled ruefully at the perplexed expression on Masaomi's face.

"You're very good at making me dream," he whispered. He sat at Masaomi's feet.

"Dream?" Masaomi repeated, taking off his flocked coat. Misao started to rise to take it, but Masaomi stopped him. He folded it in half and set it on the windowsill.

"What do you dream of?"

Masaomi tilted his head, the same peaceful expression on his face as always, and leaned forward, resting his arms on his knees. He seemed to be looking into Misao's face with his entire body.

If he leaned his head forward just a little more, he would be close enough to kiss.

Why couldn't they close such a small distance?

Even wishing for it was a dream.

Misao closed his eyes gently.

"I feel like I'm going to wake up, and all this will be a dream."

As he spoke, he lifted his eyelids. Masaomi watched him, waiting for him to continue. His light brown eyes narrowed slightly with a smile, urging him to go on.

"If I tell you, do you promise to forget all about it?"

Masaomi took a laughing breath at Misao's self-serious provision.

"I'll do what needs to be done," he agreed in amusement.

Misao gently rested his fingers on Masaomi's right knee. He lifted his face and stretched out his neck.

The smile disappeared from Masaomi's face.

His lips moved slightly: *Mi—*

Then Misao's lips covered them.

His fingers trembled slightly on Masaomi's knee. Tremors ran through his rouged lips as well, and he meekly pulled his mouth away.

Masaomi's glistening eyes stared at Misao wonderingly. Gazing back at him, Misao confessed the secret of his heart.

"I want to be loved."

As he said it, loneliness cut across his heart.

"By you."

Shock filled Masaomi's handsome face and trapped his voice.

"More than anyone in the world."

They stayed silent for a long moment, their eyes locked together.

The music of a samisen floated in from one of the other rooms.

Masaomi opened his mouth slowly, a complicated expression on his face.

"That's what you dream of?"

Misao didn't answer, and only continued to gaze at Masaomi. Finally, he slowly dropped his eyes and bowed his head. It shook from side to side.

"Please forget I told you that."

Misao reminded him of the promise reluctantly. He lifted his fingers from Masaomi's leg, but Masaomi took them in his hand.

"What a cruel thing to ask of me."

His voice was fierce in this rebuke, and Misao raised his face.

Masaomi looked angry and inconsolable.

He held Misao's delicate chin and lifted it sharply.

Confused, Misao looked up at him. Everything was in shadow.

He felt a breath on his lips.

"How can I forget that?"

There was tension in Masaomi's voice. The man sealed his lips forcefully and Misao stopped breathing.

His mind went instantly blank.

"*Mmph—*"

Misao felt as if he would be devoured by this kiss, that his tongue would be pulled from his mouth. A breath

escaped through his nose.

An arm wrapped around the back of his neck and tilted his body backwards.

Where their lips joined, Misao's body trembled each time that they pulled briefly apart.

His back slowly reached the floor.

He felt the kisses melting inside his mouth.

His mind grew hazy, as if he were suffocating. He couldn't think.

Their lips separated with a wet smack. Hot breaths slipped through this slight opening and Misao's eyes slid open.

They locked with the man's expression, awash in masculine charm.

A faint coat of rouge had transferred to his lips.

Dreamily, Misao raised his trembling right hand and, with the pad of his middle finger, he wiped the color from Masaomi's lips in a tender caress.

Masaomi's eyes grew intent.

He whispered something Misao couldn't hear, his whispered breath sweeping up his neck and Misao arched his head back. He felt Masaomi's soft hair on his neck and heard rustling cloth as he loosened his obi.

Suddenly, Misao opened his eyes wide.

His heart pounded manically in his chest. His vision swirled in confusion, but then Masaomi's lustful face was once again before him.

They gazed at each other. The passion raised the question "why?" in his mind, then melted it like wax.

Weaving between the layers of kimono and women's underthings, Masaomi wrapped an arm around

Misao's waist. He held him tightly and pulled him up, bringing his lips to Misao's.

The heavy embroidered kimono slipped from his shoulders and fell to the floor.

Misao sat before Masaomi in nothing but his red slip, devouring him with kisses.

His mind was a swirling blankness and he knew: this was pleasure.

It didn't matter what happened now, he thought. He could do anything.

Pulling back the red slip, Masaomi's palm found his knee. He stroked the skin of Misao's leg up to his inner thigh, and Misao groaned.

Their joined lips pulled apart. The next instant, Misao clung to Masaomi's shoulders and cried out senselessly.

His eyes burned with the pleasure of Masaomi's touch on his skin.

"Ah—ah! Yes!"

"Do you like that?"

Masaomi's voice was at his ear, but rich with an unfamiliar lust, making Misao's passion burn even brighter.

As Masaomi stroked Misao's leg, his thumb rolled over the tip of his organ and they heard a wet noise. Misao's panting breaths grew quicker.

His delicate fingers clung to Masaomi's vest desperately.

He pressed his forehead into Masaomi's collar bone and shook his head.

"Don't hold back."



When Misao felt the warm exhalation behind his ear, a cry that had been caught in Misao's throat broke free and he strained his head back. His entire body stiffened. When his muscles relaxed and his eyelids fell heavily, Misao rested his cheek on Masaomi's shoulder, as if he were falling.

Masaomi's lips gently brushed the skin of his temple.

The wild heaving of Misao's shoulders had dropped the red slip from his body.

He slowly raised his head and looked up at Masaomi. Misao felt embarrassed by the passion in Masaomi's gaze, but he pulled his body back slightly and raised his knees. He rested his hands on the man's shoulders.

Masaomi looked up at Misao, smiling.

"I wanted to do this with you."

As these sweet words passed his lips, Misao kissed them away, his face trembling in slow waves.

Masaomi stroked Misao's back as he held him, then slowly dropped his hand to rub the hills of flesh and squeeze them. He slipped a wet finger from his other hand between them, exploring Misao's rim.

Misao felt his face twisting painfully at the tightness he felt as Masaomi's finger plunged inside him. Masaomi pulled his mouth away to look into Misao's face, as if he could feel the change in the tension of Misao's tongue as they kissed.

"Misao—?"

Misao shook his head at Masaomi's concern. He stared frantically back at the man who watched him.

"Relax as much as you can. It's all right. I'll be nice."

Masaomi reassured him and adjusted his grip on Misao's waist.

He checked Misao's reaction constantly as he opened his body, almost too politely. When he'd taken Masaomi's warmth inside himself, Misao no longer felt the pain.

He wrapped his arms around the man's broad back.

He was so happy he thought his joy might crush him.

"I wanted so badly to hide myself in your arms," Masaomi breathed against the skin of Misao's temple. Misao rolled his head back and sighed.

"It's like a dream."

The breath tickled his earlobe. The man's whisper conquered him.

Behind the screen, Misao pulled his heavy kimono over his naked body and sat up, legs shaking. Masaomi was beside him, kindly trying to fix his ruffled hair.

He thrust the last hairpin through Misao's chignon, then pulled the kimono from Misao's shoulders.

Misao hunched up slightly in his total nakedness before Masaomi placed the red slip over his body.

"Thank you." Misao said shyly. He started to tie the slip shut, but Masaomi stopped him.

Misao looked up at him in confusion and felt

Masaomi's soft hair on his face. His lips trailed over Misao's collarbone, leaving a tight, sweet ache on the skin.

"Ah—"

A small cry escaped him and he softly lifted the eyelids he had shut reflexively.

He raised his passionate gaze to Masaomi's dear face. Masaomi held the back of Misao's neck and pulled him close to share yet another kiss. Misao's hands had only rested on the cloth covering Masaomi's chest, but they inched upwards until his fingertips brushed the man's shoulders, when he surrendered himself to an impulse and clung to him. Masaomi's hold around his waist tightened in response.

Their lips were pressed so firmly together that Misao couldn't even breathe.

His brain ached with passion.

Masaomi sucked on his tongue and Misao answered.

When their lips pulled apart, a faint, luscious voice mingled with his gasping.

He rested his cheek on Masaomi's chest.

"I don't want to ever let go."

As soon as this powerful emotion was past his lips, they heard the sound of footsteps pattering over the floor.

Misao caught his breath and turned to look. Masaomi drew Misao's body back against him and held him tightly. He laid his cheek against his right temple. Misao could tell he was watching the same direction Misao had turned to look at.

A human figure appeared through a gap in the folding screen.

It was Sazu.

She turned her head this way and that, and when she saw the two of them tangled together behind the screen, her jaw dropped.

But she was a true child of the brothel. She seemed to understand what was going on immediately.

Misao opened his mouth to say something to her, but nothing came to him, and in the end he closed his mouth again.

"M—m—m—my older sister—" Sazu stammered, after much effort. "She wants me to tell her what's going on in here..."

Misao's brows knitted and he jerked his head. Even he didn't know if he'd nodded or hung his head.

He started to stand up, but Masaomi's arms stopped him. He turned his head to look at Masaomi in confusion.

"Let me go, Masaomi."

Masaomi's lips brushed Misao's request away, then pulled him back.

Misao gasped, his eyes wide, and Masaomi gazed at him with an intense expression. Then he chuckled.

"You're the one who said you didn't want to let go." Misao's face flushed at his teasing. It was so cruel.

"Don't tease me, please."

"I don't want to let you go."

Masaomi spoke seriously, the smile disappearing from his face.

His eyes twinkled with a flicker of happiness.

But Misao was brought quickly back to reality.

When he finally looked back around, Sazu had a desperate look on her face, as if she had to pee.

"Where is Ukigumo?" Misao asked huskily.

"In the hall."

Sazu stretched her entire arm out to point. She stared at Misao, wide-eyed.

Misao wiggled around, pulling his kimono around him. Apparently Masaomi understood that the struggle was serious because this time he let Misao go.

Misao stood up. His legs still trembled slightly, but his kimono hid the unsteadiness of his lower body in its trailing splendor.

He adjusted the red slip. Sazu picked up the ornamental sash and brought it over to him. It was the trained reflex of a maid.

Dressing quickly, he tied the obi in the front.

Last was the heavy embroidered kimono. Misao turned his head to look for it when the cloth was draped around his shoulders from behind.

He looked over his shoulder and turned around.

When he was face to face with Masaomi, he was hugged tightly to the man's chest.

"Misao—"

Masaomi whispered his regret at parting against Misao's ear, but Misao shook his head firmly. If he let himself be pulled aside, his heart and actions would become lazy.

He laid his hands on Masaomi's chest and took a step back.

He'd had no idea.

Remembering the warmth of the man's body, Misao's heart, his entire body even, ached.

"I'm going," he said at last. It was pointless to look up at him.

He turned around, pulling his arms through the sleeves of the kimono that rested on his shoulders.

When he left the tea room, he saw Ukigumo to his left, standing at the end of the railing gazing up at the stars.

"Are you done?"

She turned her head lightly to look at Misao. He felt like her eyes saw straight through him.

Holding his kimono tightly closed, Misao dipped his head and hurried away. Ukigumo called out behind him, her voice ringing, "The old gentleman is here."

Misao couldn't make himself stop and face Ukigumo.

Guilt had sprung up too thickly around him.

"Thank you."

He acknowledged her in words only and walked quickly away down the hall.

He had probably done something wrong. He didn't need to wonder. He knew he'd made a mistake and that was why he could no longer look anyone in the eye.

Still... He rested against the railing that surrounded the central garden.

When he gazed up at the same sky Ukigumo had seen, he saw a beautiful moon there.

He smelled the fragrance of cherry blossoms on the breeze.

His eyelids trembled as if in a seizure.

Now that he was alone, the feeling of Masaomi against every nook in his body reawakened starkly in his mind.

He had been so happy. He was happy. So he didn't need to regret what happened.

Suddenly someone tugged on the arm of his kimono.

He looked up at the person in surprise. Kazushi was staring at him, his face tense.

"What—?"

Even before he'd seen who it was, Misao had had a bad feeling.

Kazushi explained heavily. "Master Towa has made an offer for Ukigumo's body."

Misao blinked slowly, then staggered, as if there had been an earthquake.

He felt all the warmth leave his fingertips, as if all his blood were draining. Kazushi kept his grip firm on Misao's arm as he sank heavily to the floor.

Misao spun around on the music, a bird spreading his arms wide with every revolution, his legs tucked loosely under his body. His long sleeves swept through the sky like wings.

His mind was a blank as his eyes swept about. For some reason, he wanted to laugh.

A chuckle bubbled out of him.

He fumbled his steps and drew out a staggering circle as he approached the butterfly table. He finished

by rolling onto his knees and sitting.

"Ah-ah! You're drunk, Misao!"

Two apprentices under Ukigumo hurried over to lift Misao on their shoulders. Misao shook himself free of their interference. He seemed to recall shouting something at the same time, but he wasn't really sure.

"Well, he certainly has drunk enough. Why not give up, Mister Sakai?"

Misao's eyes popped open at the sound of Ukigumo's tranquil voice behind him, and he froze. It cleared his mind of the alcohol faster than a bath of ice water.

Sakai looked up at Misao's back with the indulgent eyes of a festival god.

"But sometimes you need to escape into alcohol."

"And what do you do then?" Ukigumo countered placidly, sitting down beside Sakai. "That doesn't change reality."

She was right.

Masaomi had always belonged to her.

That was reality.

He had ignored that and let himself run loose for long enough. What more could he do?

In the end, he would have to give the man up.

"He's gotten so quiet."

The apprentices were mocking him.

"Maybe he ran out of fuel."

They peered into Misao's face from either side, giggling, when suddenly their coldness disappeared.

"Oh, here's the jester."

Ukigumo waved the man in.

"We have two butterflies here who've been resting their wings," she told him meaningfully, and the two apprentices instantly shrieked and leapt to their feet. The female performer already there began plucking out a faster rhythm on her samisen. Sprinkling the room with vibrant shrieks, the two girls and the drummer began to play hide and seek.

The festivities were like another world.

Misao was taking it all in hazily when his eyes met Sakai's kind gaze. He tried to smile at him, but he failed. Misao offered to refill his wine in an attempt to cover it up.

Sakai held his cup out and Misao silently tipped the wine bottle over it.

"I see love water in your eyes."

Sakai smiled, his eyes narrowing to thin lines.

Misao tilted his head slightly in confusion.

"You're usually tough enough to play your part, but as soon as you fall in love, you're made of glass. You're just like your mother."

"Love water?"

Misao whispered the words.

Sakai raised his eyebrows, impressed. "You've never heard of it? In more elegant circles, we call the tears you shed for love, 'love water.'"

Sakai reached out a withered hand to brush a tear from Misao's cheek.

"See? You're full of love water."

Misao's wet eyes held back a torrent of tears.

Chapter Five

Rain fell in a steady drizzle.

It was eight in the evening. The hour of feasting.

The servants carried the emptied trays from the room and put them in the hall. Everything but the wine was practically untouched. It was always like that in Katsuragi's rooms, so it seemed ridiculous to Misao that they should keep bothering to make hors d'oeuvres for him. Once the majority of the cleaning was done in the tea room, Misao entered the adjacent room.

It was Seno'o's bedroom. There was no one in it right now. Silence had also returned to the room behind him, its doors flung wide.

While the monitors on the second floor were getting the rooms ready, the girls and customers were absent for a short time. The girls had gone to fix their makeup and the men had mostly gone to the washroom.

A high quality, soft futon was piled up proudly in a corner. It had an almost poisonously vibrant design and color. Misao was on his hands and knees, smoothing the wrinkles out of it.

Then his hand stopped.

His body was immediately rocked to its core and his heart began pounding restlessly.

No. He couldn't think about it.

It would hurt too badly.

He tried to break off the train of thought somehow, but it didn't go well. Work that had been so easy to do only a moment before became difficult.

He clung to the futon, balling it in his fists.

"I saw that man of yours at the bathroom."

Suddenly, Katsuragi's voice came from behind him. Misao spun around in shock. The pounding of his heart broke into a different sort of race.

"How long have you been there?"

Katsuragi feigned ignorance and stood just inside the room. On reflection, Misao saw that Katsuragi was standing directly behind him. He was fanning himself with a single sheet of long, thin paper. He aimed it at Misao and flicked it through the air at him.

It fluttered down beside him. Misao looked down at it skeptically. When he picked it up, he saw it was a check. The number 640 was written in the amount field. The amount was so large he couldn't be shocked by it. It was just a piece of paper.

"I don't know if he's just that honest or what, but he really did pay me double."

Katsuragi sounded surprised.

Misao looked up at him: he had no idea what Katsuragi was talking about. Then he realized. His eyes shot back to the check. He checked the amount very carefully.

It was exactly double the amount that Katsuragi said he had paid to make Misao up like a courtesan.

He raised his wide-eyed stare to Katsuragi and hesitantly asked, "Did Masaomi—?"

"I don't know his name."

Katsuragi snorted derisively and Misao shot to his feet. "Hold it! Are you actually planning to take this money? You have to give it back! I'll be in trouble otherwise."

"You'll be in trouble?" Katsuragi parroted tauntingly. Then he came over and sat down on the exquisite bedding that Misao had laid out and smirked. "I never thought I'd hear you talk to me like that."

"Quit it. I mean it."

Misao put his hands on the bedding and bent forward. He was begging. But Katsuragi knocked him over.

"What?"

For a moment, Misao didn't know what had happened.

Just before his back hit the floor, Katsuragi caught at his collar and tore one side of his kimono open.

Misao's eyes were wide, searching Katsuragi's face as Katsuragi knelt over him.

A wet pain ran up his neck, raising goosebumps on his entire body.

He tried to scream, but his voice seemed stuck in his throat and only the smallest sound made it out.

He shoved back against the powerful chest, fighting back at random, but the man hanging over him didn't even flinch.

His teeth clattered, making a terrible noise.

He turned his face all the way to the side, burying it in the bedding, and shoved at Katsuragi with all his might. But his hands met no resistance and only flailed through empty space.

The weight that had pressed down on his body was gone.

He pulled his kimono closed again and sat up. He scooted back. It had been only a few brief moments, but his breathing was labored, as if he had just sprinted half a mile. In contrast, Katsuragi sat across from him looking perfectly calm, as if nothing at all had happened. He lay on his side, his head propped up on one elbow.

"I hope you die," Misao spat at him through ragged breaths.

Katsuragi's lips only twisted slightly and he rolled onto his back on the futon. He had no remorse at all. He folded an arm behind his head as a pillow, then moved onto his side, looking up at Misao at an angle. He seemed completely at his ease.

"You've been almost crossing the line the last couple of days. But if you don't want to get hurt, you'd better remember your place."

Katsuragi sounded almost bored. Misao glared at him. His body was still tense.

"You've really lost your touch with the customers. Not that you're a lost cause. When you fight back so desperately like that, it really turns a guy on."

Misao knew that he was implicitly commenting on the fact that he'd been with a man.

His lips trembled in humiliation and he pressed them tightly together.

Misao had known it all along.

He couldn't play these erotic games with people anymore. It was too frightening.

Katsuragi jerked his chin at the wrinkled check

that still lay atop the bedding.

"You can have that money."

"What?"

Misao frowned dubiously. He wondered what else Katsuragi had up his sleeve.

Apparently his suspicions showed on his face. Katsuragi laughed at the frown on his face.

"You're no fun. Why can't you just believe me?"

"Whose fault is that?" Misao muttered back.

"Who knows."

Katsuragi rolled onto his back and folded both arms behind his head.

"Think of it like my admission fee, for you showing me things I would never usually see at a brothel. Then you can do what you want with the money. Buy yourself clean, give it back to that man, or whatever."

Katsuragi spoke quietly, looking up at the ceiling. It didn't seem like a joke or some cruel trick.

Misao let out a soft sigh. Finally, a bit of tension was released from his tight body.

"I don't understand what you're trying to do."

Misao spoke the truth.

"I told you." Katsuragi turned his head slightly toward Misao and smiled. "I only pay for things that entertain me."

"How refreshing."

Misao shook his head.

"So what's it going to be? You want the money or not?"

Katsuragi was pushing the choice on him.

Of course, Misao wanted to give the money back

to Masaomi. But he hadn't seen him since last night, when Kazushi told him Masaomi had made an offer to Ukigumo. Misao doubted he would ever see him again. Misao had acted shamefully in front of him. He'd heard Masaomi was coming to the tea house again that night, but when it came time to prepare Ukigumo's room, Kazushi had kindly offered to go in Misao's place.

Misao's eyes rested on the check, conflicted.

"I want you... to return it to him."

The emptiness of his hopes showed in his voice.

Katsuragi snorted and glanced at Misao.

"You think I'd do something that nice?"

He offered this predictable response with a deeply shocked expression.

"I didn't think so," Misao answered bitterly. His fingers still hesitant, Misao picked up the check. He tried to convince himself that it wasn't so much money that he had to think about it. He had to return it.

Decided, he strode from the bedroom into the tea room. His feet wanted to run, but he reconsidered it. He turned back to the room. Katsuragi was staring up at the ceiling as lazily as ever. He seemed to have lost all interest in Misao, and Misao briefly wondered whether to say it or not. Part of him was reluctant to say it. But he decided to tell him anyway. It was simple politeness.

"Thank you."

When he heard that, Katsuragi scowled horribly, so Misao was reassured that he had made the right choice.

He ran down the checkerboard complex of hallways, looking this way and that. At this hour, the halls were filled with rushing servants carrying bedding

and it was hard to get through.

"Kazushi!"

Misao spotted the back of the person he was looking for through the crowd and called out to him. He must have just finished preparing a room, because he wasn't doing anything. As Misao ran up to him, he asked, "Is Ukigumo's room ready?"

Kazushi looked a little surprised. Then his face turned serious and he shook his head.

"It's done, but Master Towa's not going there tonight."

"What?"

"A different customer is using Ukigumo's room, so she's using the servants' room tonight. The Cherry Room," Kazushi explained, staring straight into Misao's eyes. "But Ukigumo isn't there right now. She's fixing her makeup."

Implied in Kazushi's words was the suggestion that if he wanted to be alone with Masaomi, he still could. Misao frowned, feeling like he was missing something in Kazushi's words.

"Did you talk to Masaomi?" Misao asked worriedly, and for several moments Kazushi seemed obviously confused by the question. But he soon had his usual look of quick comprehension again and arched his eyebrow at Misao.

"If you want me to wait on him for you, we're going to have to have a talk. Can't you even talk to him?"

He patted Misao on the back jokingly, then went by him.

"You'd better hurry!"

He tossed back one last stupid warning. It reminded him of the check and Misao ran down the hall again. It was such a terrifying amount of money it made him uncomfortable to hold onto it. What if he lost it? The thought chilled him. But when he arrived outside the Cherry Room, a different sort of fear filled his heart.

The door was open.

In the gap between two folding screens, Misao spotted Masaomi sitting, legs stretched out, on top of a decent quality futon. He was wearing a summer kimono. A lantern behind the screen shone on his downcast face.

There was something unbearably poignant about the sight.

Misao couldn't speak. He only stood there for a long moment.

He had watched Masaomi for too long, he knew.

Masaomi glanced up, as if something had caught his attention. He looked vaguely surprised to see Misao and whispered his name.

While Misao's eyes searched for something to look at, Masaomi walked out from behind the screens. Before Misao realized it, he was standing right in front of him. He let out a sigh of relief and smiled.

"I didn't see you all night. I was worried something had happened."

He put his arms around Misao's shoulders without any hesitation and started to pull him inside the room, and Misao couldn't resist. It was like trying to resist the force of gravity.

"I need to talk to you," Masaomi said, waving

Misao behind the screens.

Misao's body became very still and his face tightened.

Would Masaomi force him to hear it from his own lips?

Why? The sad question billowed through his heart. Masaomi didn't need to be that honest with him. That was just cruelty.

"I know."

His voice was like air escaping.

It was pathetic.

Masaomi looked surprised. "What?"

When Misao didn't answer, Masaomi sat down on the futon and drew Misao down beside him. His face was so close.

"What do you know?" he asked again, confused. Misao's eyes dropped, unable to bear it.

"When will it be?"

His voice was hard.

Masaomi took a moment to think. "The sooner the better, I think."

There was some hesitation in his answer. Masaomi cupped Misao's cheek with his left hand. He turned Misao's downcast face slightly and looked into his eyes.

"You don't seem very happy about it."

Masaomi sounded slightly apprehensive.

"Happy?"

A tremble ran through Misao's lips and as he gazed at Masaomi's face, so close to his own, his face contorted. He knew his expression was becoming accusatory.

How could he be happy about it?

"Misao?"

Masaomi looked troubled. Unable to bear the sight of him, Misao twisted his head away, pulling free of Masaomi's hand.

He spotted an elegant-looking tassel in a corner of the bed.

Dark emotions swirled up to fill his heart. He was afraid he might spit out some horrible abuse at any moment.

He thought his heart cried out with despair alone, but how could that drive him to such depths?

He shouldn't have come.

He should have surrendered to reality without ever seeing Masaomi again.

"Are you upset about something?"

Masaomi sounded bewildered.

Misao's eyes hardened and he turned sharply to face him. How dare Masaomi ask him that? Masaomi had been caught completely off-guard. Misao opened his mouth to hurl an assault at him. But some small discretion still remained in a corner of his mind, telling him he had no right to do that. The cold logic forced Misao's trembling lips shut again.

He turned away and hung his head.

Cautiously, Masaomi started to say something, but before he could get it out Misao pulled the check from his sleeve and held it out to him.

"Katsuragi says he doesn't want it."

His voice was hard. He raised his eyes from the check to Masaomi's face. He was looking down at the

check in Misao's hands with loathing.

"Then you should have burned it," Masaomi said with a cold evenness.

Misao felt as if his hand had been slapped away.

Katsuragi had told him he could return it, so Misao had begun to think of it like actual money. But unless someone cashed it, the check was just a piece of paper. Masaomi wouldn't lose anything.

"Were you with him tonight?" Masaomi asked quietly. His face contained the exact displeasure that was in his voice. Misao felt like he was being attacked for something he had narrowly avoided, and he looked away.

"Even though you didn't come to see me?"

After this accusation, Masaomi sighed and rested his hand over the check in Misao's hand. He pushed it gently back towards Misao.

"I'm not sure this is enough to bring you back with me to Tokyo."

His voice was earnest. Misao's eyes widened. His mouth fell open at the same moment, but it took much longer before he managed to say something.

"What... did you say?"

When he finally did speak, his voice was rough.

"Why? I don't understand. You're supposed to spend tonight with Ukigumo! Aren't you getting married?"

Misao exploded. Masaomi gaped, then his face slowly filled with anguish.

There was a brief silence, and finally he sighed.

"We're not getting married."

Masaomi's voice melted away into the silence.

Misao's eyes widened as he stared at him.

"But then why—?"

His lips trembled.

His brain felt like it was bruised from a lack of oxygen.

"You're going to keep her as your mistress?"

Misao asked, despairing.

Masaomi looked as if he wanted to argue, but apparently thinking better of it, he closed his mouth as soon as he'd opened it.

Misao's heart fluttered and his mind clouded.

"No—you're not like that!" he muttered derisively, but what was really in his heart? What did he really want? Really wish for? His emotions had all gone astray—he didn't know anymore.

Agony clouded Masaomi's brow.

"What did you think I was like?" he asked, his voice controlled.

Misao squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. He pushed a hand against his temple and hung his head.

"Misao."

Masaomi reached out to touch his shoulder and Misao almost knocked his hand away, but he sagged. Masaomi held him in his arms, steadying Misao against the tremors of his body. He buried his face in Masaomi's robe. He felt the man's warmth.

"No—"

His throat was tight.

"Misao."

Held in the man's arms, hearing him speak his

name, Misao pounded against his chest, just once.

"How could you?"

He squeezed a husky voice from his constricted throat.

How could he ever be expected to give up the warmth he felt in this man's arms?

"You should have just told me that she was the only one you cared about."

They heard a voice suddenly from the other side of the screens, and Misao stiffened. He lifted his head slightly. Masaomi was already gazing seriously in the same direction. He still held Misao in his arms, but not strongly enough to hold him back. Misao pulled petulantly away and turned angrily to the screen.

"You don't need to look so innocent, Masaomi."

Ukigumo came through the screens. She was wearing a nightgown.

Painfully aware of how very out of place he was, Misao started to stand up. But Ukigumo stopped him with a look. She sat formally on the edge of the bed. Then, without the slightest perturbation, she fixed her eyes on Masaomi with a purity like morning dew. Masaomi moved into a more formal position as well and looked back at her, as if awaiting orders.

Misao was perplexed by the extreme formality they treated each other with. They were nothing like a man and woman in bed together.

Nothing like a courtesan and one of her regular customers.

Misao held his breath, but Ukigumo paid him absolutely no attention. She fixed Masaomi with a cool

regard and spoke calmly. "You should take good care of the things most precious to you. Don't pay attention to anything else."

A look of deep regret came over Masaomi's face.

"Really, Masaomi."

For the first time, her face had a touch of warmth in it.

"You need to forget about me."

Misao was trying to look small and quiet, but when Ukigumo gave Masaomi this unexpected notice of separation, a cry escaped him nevertheless. He looked at Masaomi, wondering how he would take it, but he didn't seem particularly upset. He just sighed gently and quietly lowered his eyes.

"You won't change your mind?" Masaomi asked, looking up at her, but Ukigumo only shook her head, her long lashes never fluttering.

"As I told you initially, I am not interested in accepting pity."

Finally, Misao lost the thread of the conversation.

He had no idea what they were talking about. The conversation was not developing at all as it should for a man and woman who obviously loved each other.

"I, Ukigumo—but no, you knew me as Kotoko—I loved you when we were children. And because I loved you, I know very well that you never loved me."

Ukigumo's story, which she told with slightly narrowed eyes, staggered Misao's heart.

Images flickered into his blank mind one after another, and everything fell into place.

A gasp escaped his lips, which had opened without

his realizing it.

"I'm sorry, Kotoko," Masaomi apologized. "I've been extremely inconsiderate to you."

"Yes. I am humiliated."

Ukigumo spoke harshly.

"I am, in some ways, the best there is at the Oumi Tea House. It would dishonor my name to be paid out of sympathy by a man who will not share my bed."

Ukigumo held her long neck straight. Her decisive tone showed her inner strength.

"Having dedicated my body to the pursuit of sensuality and love, I will leave here having conquered the great gates by love. But you are not the one to help me do that, Masaomi."

"Is there someone who can?"

Ukigumo answered Masaomi's question with a sorrowful movement of her eyelids and a mysterious smile. Then she turned her inscrutable expression on Misao.

"Forgive me."

Ukigumo inclined her head slowly to him, and Misao shook his head, uncomprehending. His shoulders were incredibly tense.

"I thought I would surely win Masaomi's heart this time, but I attempted many unflattering frivolities."

She was referring to feeding her guest stories.

That was perhaps the reason Masaomi had gotten the idea that Misao was a prostitute, but there was no way Misao could blame Ukigumo for it at this point. In fact, her apology only made Misao feel guilty.

Misao said nothing, but Ukigumo's smile seemed

to say that she had understood it all. She looked back at Masaomi.

"As I said earlier," she murmured in an almost lyrical voice, "You were the only one I cared for. That is all that need be said. The power of those words will stay with anyone who has been in love."

As she concluded tranquilly, Ukigumo touched three fingers to the floor before her knees and bowed. Masaomi's melancholy gaze rested on her upswept hair.

"As regards our earlier discussion, I'm afraid that I must refuse."

Ukigumo lifted her head, utterly undisturbed, and Masaomi quirked a smile. "I wish you the best."

This brief hope brought a look of girlish happiness to Ukigumo's face that Misao had never seen. Tiny white teeth peeked out from her lips.

After Ukigumo had left, the screen doors glowed almost blue in the moonlight after a rain.

Masaomi gazed at the pale light, his face fragile with the distant thoughts running through his mind. His mind must have been filled with thoughts of Ukigumo.

This was their goodbye.

Misao quietly stood up, causing Masaomi to turn his head slightly and focus his eyes vaguely on him.

"Where are you going?"

Masaomi looked up at him, trying to hold him back, and Misao smiled faintly.

"To sit beside you," he murmured, and sat down.

He laid a gentle hand on the man's cheek.

"You've been rejected, haven't you?" Misao asked kindly.

Masaomi smiled ruefully and lowered his eyes. "Apparently."

His head hung down slightly as he agreed, so Misao had to bend forward a little to lend him his shoulder. Masaomi's forehead sunk into his right shoulder and Misao rested his temple against Masaomi's head.

He felt there was no need to speak, but Masaomi broke the silence, speaking quietly into his shoulder, so Misao listened.

Ukigumo had been the daughter of a famous family of former nobility in Nara, the Kadokuras. The Towa family and Kadokura family were friends, and Masaomi had thought of Ukigumo as a little sister. But the Kadokura family had fallen.

"After that, no one heard from any of them. They all disappeared, except for one who I finally located: Kotoko."

Misao finally understood how Masaomi must have felt when he heard the story of Misao's past in the rickshaw to Dotonbori.

He had been unable to interrupt. Because he had been unable to help.

"My older brother was the first one to find Kotoko in the pleasure district, completely by chance. When I heard, I decided I would come and see, though both my brothers were against it. So much time had already passed so cruelly, you see. They said Kotoko would never want to see anyone she'd known before."

The fact that Masaomi regretted his decision had long been clear.

"You were right about what you said the first day. For some reason, I just couldn't let go. Was it pity?"

"It's all right."

Gazing at the light of the lantern, Misao absolved Masaomi of his self-condemnation.

"I don't think you're arrogant, Masaomi."

He said it again. "I don't think you're arrogant."

"No—"

Masaomi lifted his head.

He looked straight into Misao's eyes.

"I am arrogant."

Misao looked back at the firm front he had taken on. Masaomi touched Misao's hair lightly with his fingertips, then stroked Misao's temple with the palm of his hand, sweeping his hair behind his ear.

Misao tilted his head slightly in embarrassment. His face hopeful, Masaomi spoke solemnly.

"I will take you back with me to Tokyo, at all costs."

Every word was filled with this desire.

When their colliding gazes made Misao tremble, Masaomi declared his intention all the more earnestly.

"Even if you turn away from me as Kotoko did. I won't let you leave me. Ever."

Misao felt a sharp pain deep in his nose and, as the tension left his widened eyes, tears flowed down his cheeks.

He smiled at the man he loved through bleary eyes.

"You promised..."

Misao's thin voice trembled, as if bobbing on wavy water.

"You would take me to the sea again."

Masaomi nodded, and his face broke into a broad smile.

"I also promised to take you on a boat."

"Together..."

Misao had never expected that dream to come true.

The emotions that had pushed through his eyes reached their peak, and he covered his mouth with his hands.

"I'm so happy."

Unable to hold back his endless tears, he bowed his head.

"So happy."

"Misao—"

His face was soaked by his pattering tears. Misao clenched a hand atop his knee, and Masaomi covered it with one of his own.

He tilted his head and gently brushed his lips over the corners of Misao's eyes, kissing away the tears.

His eyelids fluttered.

Misao lifted his tear-streaked face. The next kiss fell on the back of the hand that covered his mouth. His faintly closed eyelashes popped open and he was captivated by the man's eyes, so close to his own.

Misao let the hand that covered half his face slowly drop. Lips covered his exposed lips. The kiss was light, almost bringing his tears to a halt, but it grew deeper,

invading his mouth in its intensity.

"I feel like I'm dreaming."

Masaomi chuckled, slipping his lips over Misao's cheek, nibbling on his earlobe, then tracing down his neck. He pulled Misao's kimono open. He stopped suddenly. Misao brushed Masaomi's head with his left hand and tilted his head curiously, wondering what was wrong.

"Masaomi?"

Misao freed his fingers from the tangle of Masaomi's hair.

Masaomi looked up at him. The severity of his expression shocked Misao. He was closely examining the left side of Misao's neck. The only thing that could be there was the bruise Katsuragi had made as a prank. Misao was suddenly terrified of Katsuragi's depravity, wondering if he had planned even this.

Masaomi shifted his eyes up to Misao's.

"I didn't do that."

His low, sharp statement made Misao clap a hand over his neck to hide it, but he realized that only looked suspicious and he hurriedly tried to explain.

"No, I—Katsuragi was playing a joke, and—"

"Katsuragi." Masaomi whispered his name terribly. "What an infuriating name."

Misao felt pangs of Masaomi's irritation in the air and he frowned, wondering what to do. He hadn't been this afraid of angering someone since before he'd become a maid.

He knew the reason for it. He wasn't afraid of making Masaomi angry at him.

He was afraid of making Masaomi hate him.

"You said before that I wasn't that kind of person."

His voice was controlled and unemotional. Misao gazed at him pleadingly and nodded.

Masaomi lifted the hand that covered the bruise from Misao's neck. He offered his lips in its place.

"I want you to remember that."

"I—"

Masaomi sucked on the skin so hard it felt like he was biting him. Misao fell back, raising his right knee in surprise.

"I don't want anyone but me to do this. I don't want them to even touch you."

His hot breath whispered over Misao's neck and his eyelids fluttered. Masaomi lifted his head and, from close enough that he could have kissed Misao, he murmured, "I'm a jealous, narrow-minded man, I suppose."

His lips were sealed off as he gasped. The bottom hem of his kimono was rolled up and the man's hands swept over his thighs. As his neck quivered, Masaomi pulled his lips away.

"I want you to be mine alone."

Captivated by the sweet, intense entreaty, Misao opened his faintly closed eyelids and locked his eyes with Masaomi's frantic gaze. He couldn't hold back a faint sigh. Masaomi stopped the breath in his throat with words like fire.

"Your heart and your body."

The two rushed at each other in their lust. Misao felt the part within him where they joined together tightly

fill with wetness. He knew it was the passion Masaomi had released into him, and he panted raggedly, his throat convulsing with ecstasy.

Misao's legs were open wide, and Masaomi adjusted his hold around his waist. As he shifted slightly inside, an exquisite sensation ran up Misao's spine and he let out a deep moan. Masaomi gazed into Misao's face as he bent over him. He deepened the connection of their lower bodies and Misao threw his head back and cried out.

His eyes were squeezed tightly shut. His hips rocked slightly.

"No, I—I can't—"

He was enthralled.

Masaomi sucked his earlobe into his mouth, teasing it with his tongue. He bit into it and a sweet thrill of pain shot through him. The sound of Masaomi's voice, husky with pleasure as it pronounced his name, made Misao's heart skip a beat.

"I want more," he urged at Misao's ear, and Misao turned his eyes to the side, shimmering with tears. Masaomi looked down at him and smiled lustfully. That alone was enough to make Misao lose all reason.

"I feel like I'm going crazy," Misao murmured breathily. He wrapped his arms around Masaomi's back, and Masaomi lifted him up.

"Ah—nngh!"

Unconsciously trying to flee the thing buried inside his body, Misao clung to Masaomi's arms and raised himself onto his knees. But the man rested his hands on Misao's pelvis and immediately pulled him back down.



"Nngh! Ah—ahh!"

The penetration was unbearable, and he clung to the man's neck. He stayed like that until his body got used to the new position. As if he'd noticed calm return to Misao's breathing, Masaomi reached up and pulled his arms away from his neck.

His lips brushed over his temple.

"I want to see you when you're crazy."

His whispered words dazzled Misao, and he pulled his face away. Gazing into Misao's dubious eyes, Masaomi planted both hands on the bed and leaned back. He settled onto his elbows.

Misao swallowed dryly.

This position meant that he would have to move. Misao had seen the women doing this. It was a popular request with those women, but of course Misao had never done it before.

Breathing deeply, Misao rested his hands on the stomach that he rode. He focused his eyes on his hands and, trying not to spoil Masaomi's pleasure, he moved his hips as he'd seen the girls do. But he didn't do it very well, and a pained cry escaped him. He was sure it didn't feel good for Masaomi either, and he looked up at him as he panted raggedly. Just as he'd feared, a tense frown awaited him. Misao hung his head.

"You're adorable."

Masaomi smiled at him and put a hand to his waist. He stroked the line of Misao's body, then traced upwards. Sex had made Misao's body incredibly sensitive and his entire body shuddered as Masaomi caressed his skin.

"Just do whatever feels good for you."

Masaomi rubbed one of his nipples with a thumb.
"Ah—"

Misao ached inside and his hips began to move naturally. The place inside him that wanted to be struck harder throbbed, and Misao tensed his knees and dropped his hips further to drive Masaomi where he wanted him, rubbing inside him. The pleasure it unleashed arched Misao's throat. When he began touching himself in front, he lost all control over himself and his hips wiggled in every direction.

"Ah! It's so good—it—ah!"

His mouth hung open lewdly and Masaomi traced his lips with the pad of a finger. Misao gazed rapturously down at him. Masaomi's gaze was indulgent, swollen with pleasure, and it locked into Misao's gaping eyes.

"You're good. It feels very nice."

Masaomi's middle finger slipped into his mouth through the slight opening in his lips and tickled the inside of Misao's lower lip, and stroked around the base of his tongue. The sensation was overwhelming. Misao tangled his tongue with the man's finger. He felt himself slipping into a dream as he sucked on it. His brain ached lusciously.

"I'm going to light the lanterns."

Caught off-guard by Kazushi's voice, Misao accidentally bit hard into Masaomi's finger. Masaomi's eyes narrowed with pain, but there was no time for anything like an apology. Masaomi grabbed Misao's head, rigid and wide-eyed, and pulled it down to kiss him deeply. He rolled Misao onto his side, then pushed his back into the bed. He pushed shallowly against him

and swallowed up the scream that Misao unleashed.

His fingers clawed at the air as the man squeezed deeper inside.

There may have been screens to obscure them, but Misao knew better than anyone that they would be completely visible to the outside world through the gaps.

Humiliation and pleasure whirlpooled together and threw Misao's mind into chaos.

He thought the lewd noises made by their bodies joining together sounded extraordinarily loud.

"I'm sorry, I need to do my job."

At the sound of Kazushi's apology from only a few feet away, Misao felt dizzy with embarrassment.

"I don't think anyone else will come bother you now. Enjoy your stay."

Masaomi waited a few moments after Kazushi put the oil in the lantern and left the room, before he stopped moving and took his lips off of Misao's.

"I can't believe you," Misao said in shock, between his panting breaths.

Masaomi chuckled at Misao and raised his eyebrows.

"I hid your pretty face and voice, didn't I?"

He dropped a kiss on Misao's silent lips, then began an irresistible wave of motion in his lower body. It conquered Misao. But before he surrendered himself to it, he realized for the first time that this man might be even more trouble than Katsuragi.

Before the girls went out to attract customers that afternoon, the back room was filled with rich white smoke. The tea house owner had been puffing without rest on the tobacco in his pipe, looking irritable. Misao sat across a heating box from him, glowering critically. "It certainly is smoky." But the owner only glared viciously at Masaomi, who was sitting very formally beside Misao. He showed no sign of having heard Misao's complaint.

"I was under the impression that you were here to see Ukigumo, Master Towa."

Sitting beside the prickling owner, Gikuyo spoke to Masaomi with a serene look. Misao stole a glance at Masaomi. He nodded to Gikuyo placidly. "But Ukigumo has cast me aside."

"And so you suggest taking a servant in her place? How very whimsical."

Gikuyo replied without the slightest change in her calm expression. In contrast, the owner lashed out at Masaomi resentfully.

"Do you know how much work I've put into him over the years? I made him study all the arts and scholarship! Do you know how much that cost? Are you seriously—"

"I will pay it all back, even if it takes some time."

Masaomi cut the owner off in the middle of his tirade, forcefully declaring his own desire. That resistance seemed to have angered him.

"And just how much do you think you owe?" the owner shouted, pounding on the side of the heater.

"How much?" Masaomi countered coolly.

Apparently he'd called the bluff, because the

owner whined, "It's not a question of money!"

He was insufferable.

"A—a—and what's th—that on your neck?"

He pointed a finger, trembling with rage, at Misao. It was the mark that Katsuragi had made on his neck, that Masaomi had then darkened with the imprint of his own body.

He didn't need to be ashamed of it here. Misao stretched his neck out and looked straight back at the owner, hiding nothing.

"I did it," Masaomi confessed crisply.

Misao had vowed to stand firm no matter what was said to him, but that threatened to bring tears to his eyes. He felt a dull ache in his neck.

Enraged, the owner's mouth hung half open, shaking with anger.

"How dare you... how dare you! I raised that child as my very own, and you've ruined him!"

"Well, sir," Masaomi responded, drawing himself up beautifully in his flocked coat, "I want to take responsibility for my actions. Would you please listen to what we have to say calmly?"

"How can I be calm about a thing like this?" he shouted angrily, leaping up from his seat with the force of his anger.

"Disgraceful."

Gikuyo had sat silently watching the proceedings until then, but now she snorted and berated the owner. She glared at him fiercely.

"Sit back down at once."

Her voice was threatening, and he huddled back

down in his seat fearfully.

Seeing their bizarre power relationship, Masaomi glanced meaningfully over at Misao. Misao turned to look back at him incredulously.

The owner had settled down physically, but he was still grumbling to himself. Gikuyo slipped the bowl of her pipe into a bag of tobacco and, without once looking at him, spit out a harsh insult. "Just shut up, you horrible little man!"

Despite the affront, the owner obediently shut his mouth on his abuse. As if she expected nothing different, Gikuyo knocked the ash out of her pipe and into the heater.

"You paid back enough to cover your room and board each month. Saying that that's all just money lost is far too patronizing and greedy."

Misao's shoulders trembled. Also sensing what she meant, Masaomi stared at Gikuyo.

"Will you feed him enough to keep him off the streets?"

Masaomi nodded once, firmly. "Of course."

Misao felt strange.

He didn't know if it was because he had Masaomi there beside him or because he never thought Masaomi would be with him. No matter how he stared at the woman smoking a pipe across from him, his heart remained still and he could think of nothing to complain about.

"I mean for the rest of his life."

Masaomi smiled faintly at Gikuyo's qualification. "Of course."

Seeing the discussion wrapping up between the

two of them, the owner could no longer restrain himself and he cut in frantically.

"Absolutely not! I will never give up Misao!"

A heavy *clang* rang out through the room, and ashes tumbled to the floor.

"Would you shut up!"

Gikuyo had slammed her pipe down on the heater and snapped at the owner, staring piercingly at him with a dangerous glint in her eye.

"If you want me to continue working here, you will be silent!"

The owner choked.

"Tamaki—" Misao whispered, and Gikuyo glared at him. Then she turned to Masaomi.

"Take him wherever you like. The owner himself has said this isn't a question of money. We couldn't accept anything from you. And we've done so much to offend you already."

Gikuyo wrapped it all up indifferently, but Masaomi bowed deeply to her for what seemed at least a hundred times.

"Thank you for entrusting your boy to me."

Gikuyo glanced down at Masaomi without the tiniest flicker of emotion as he thanked her, and arched an eyebrow disapprovingly at Misao.

"How strange. You haven't said a word all this time."

Misao stared straight at Gikuyo in silence, then bowed his head to the same angle as Masaomi's. "Thank you."

Misao spoke quietly, his face to the floor.

"For giving birth to me."

Misao sat back up after this final goodbye. Gikuyo was gazing up at the purple smoke as it rose to the ceiling, as if she found it utterly fascinating.

"By the way, Master Towa."

Masaomi finally raised his head as Gikuyo called his name dully.

She very slowly turned her eyes from the ceiling to Masaomi's face, bringing her pipe to her lips.

"Ukigumo has no lingering emotions where you're concerned, does she?"

Gikuyo narrowed her eyes and savorously exhaled a cloud of smoke.

"There may be some small concern," Masaomi answered solemnly, then turned to look earnestly at Misao. "But he is the only one I want."

Misao smiled, gazing back at Masaomi.

It's true.

Misao knew that with those words alone, he could follow the man anywhere.

Conclusion

The seabirds swam through the air.

When Misao looked up, their wings looked black against the light. Or maybe the birds really were black. They spread their wings wide and slipped easily through the blue sky.

Masaomi stood beside him, looking up at the sky as well. His eyes were squinted against the brilliant light. The flaps of his black flocked coat fluttered in the wind, like another seabird joining the flock.

Misao smiled to himself, and Masaomi looked over at him. There was a question in his eyes, so Misao nodded.

His long hair frolicked with the gusting wind, but he pushed it behind his ears.

He inhaled deeply, filling his nostrils with the scent of salt water.

His eyes twinkling, he gazed out over the pure nature that spread out before him.

Peacefully.

Majestically.

The glittering reflections of light.

"It's blue," Misao whispered, and above him a seabird dove to skim low over the waves, then a moment later, soared high into the sky.

Postscript

Cherry blossom season has arrived. At this time of year, you just want to stop what you're doing and gaze up at them for hours. How have you all been spending this glorious spring? This is Venio Tachibana, who just fantastically destroyed the laptop she'd been using since the middle of this book.

This book is, obviously, about a brothel. My editor suggested that I write something set in the pleasure quarters, and I actually found it very interesting to write something so Japanese. At the same time, while I was writing, the descriptions of bright cities made me so wistful... We always want what we can't have, I suppose.

And pleasure quarters mean kimonos. And in the Meiji era, Western clothes. Tooko Miyagi gave us some gorgeous illustrations showing the contrast between East and West. I always thought of these places as very visually beautiful, and the illustrations only cemented that for me. I forced a lot of immoral demands on Ms. Miyagi, but despite it all she delivered a gorgeous level of detail in her drawings for the book. So I'll take this opportunity to thank her copiously, and to apologize. And also to everyone who helped out in so many ways, most of all my editor, thank you!

And to all of you who are reading my postscript:

we've reached the end, but thank you so much for choosing this book.

I may be getting a little ahead of myself, but we have loose plans next year to publish another story linked to this one, so perhaps we'll meet again sometime. I hope so. Goodbye for now.

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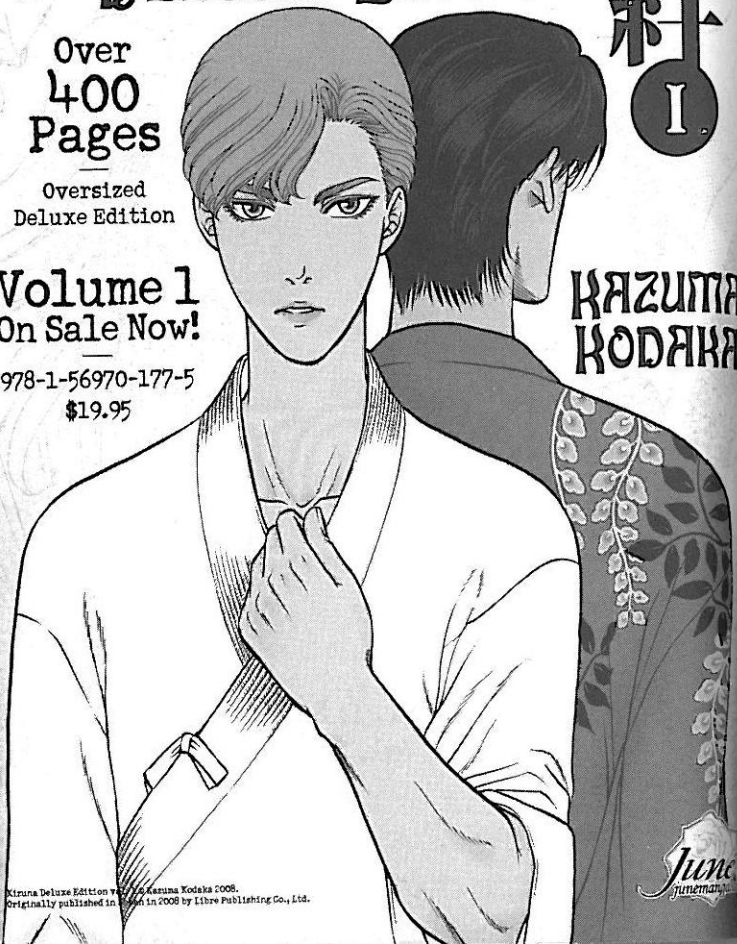
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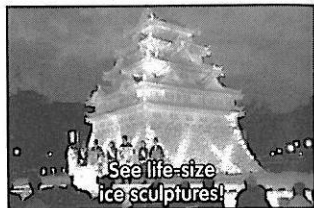
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Fangirl Paradise

May

Walk Otome Road, meet a yaoi mangaka!

Celebrate your, um... fangirl-ness on a tour to soak up all the Boy's Love, Johnny's, and otaku culture Japan has to offer.



Meet a famous yaoi mangaka, such as Makoto Tateno!

Hanaki Tour

August

Experience Japan's famous fireworks and festivals!

View Japan's Famous firework displays! First visit pop culture Tokyo, and later stay in a traditional Japanese hotel!



Experience Japan's famous and unique fireworks displays!

J-Fashion Tour

September

Make a trek to the home of your favorite brands!

Attend a fashion show in Harajuku! Shop for your favorite Japanese brands!



Visit and shop in Harajuku, Shibuya 109, Laforet, and more!

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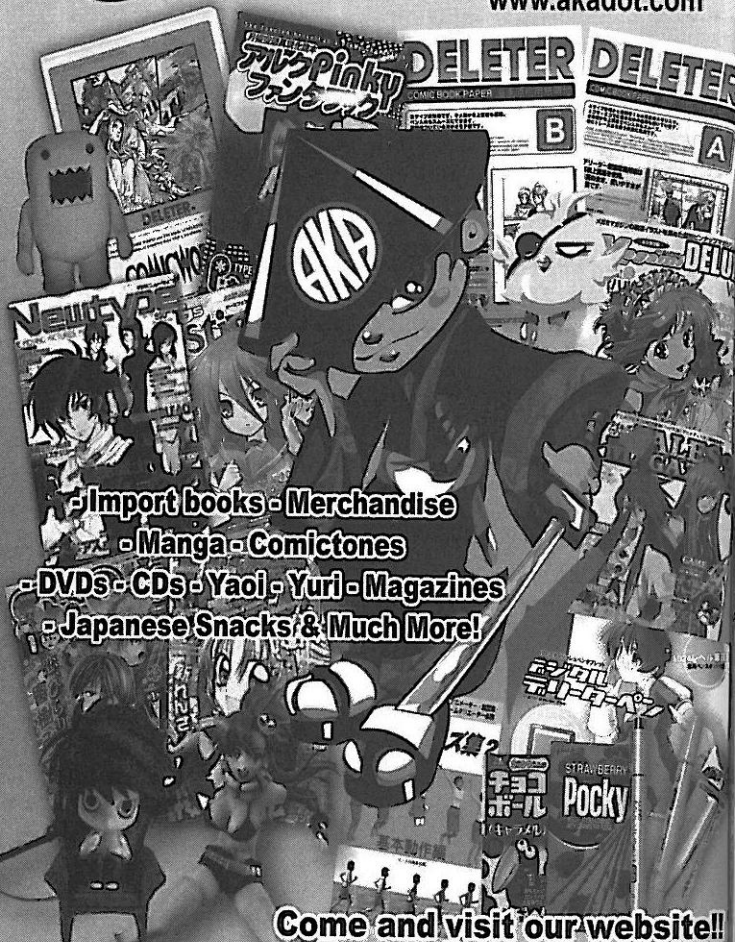
Details about these tours and more online at:

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